

# That Which Lingers

by MadamHydra

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Summary: The dark and bloody past returns to haunt Kenshin and Saitoh with a vengeance. It all starts with a series of unexplained deaths and Misao's fateful encounter with Saitoh's wife and a mysterious black sword.

## 1. Parts 00-04

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Rurouni Kenshin - "That Which Lingers" (prologue, Parts 1-4) by Madamhydra

This story is set in my own ALTERNATE REALITY universe which I've called "The Nightwitch Tales" -- think of it as Rurouni Kenshin mixed with various supernatural and paranormal elements. Other stories in this alternate reality are: "Night Visitor"; "All in the Family"; "Romancing the Wolf"

WARNING: This story is "semi-dark" -- it has dark elements (violence, etc) but it's not a darkfic! Actually, there's quite a bit of romance in it.... ^\_-

This story takes place after the end of the Kyoto story arc. After that, it takes a sharp left turn into its own world. Elements of the Revenge story arc may or may not show up later on in the story. The Kenshin Gumi already know that Saitoh survived the destruction of Shishio's stronghold.

As always, C&C is greatly appreciated! ^\_^

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THAT WHICH LINGERS: A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra

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Prologue: The Shadow of Ghosts to Come

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> Disclaimer<br>

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> Text Conventions<br>

( ) are character thoughts  
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\* ----- \* marks the start and end of flashbacks  
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[ ] denote visual or time notes

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[Kyoto, 13 years in the past]

In a modest house in the outskirts of the city, a man lay in bed. Unmoving. His stillness was not a matter of choice. He could hear voices from the hallway.

A young woman's voice said in desperate tones, "Are you sure!?"

An older man replied, "Yes. I've tried my best, but the injuries were too great. He will never walk again. And I doubt he will even be able to regain any meaningful use of his arms."

"But... but... surely, there must be something you can do!"

"There is nothing that can be done! I'm not a magician! I can't heal a broken spine with a wave of my hand."

There was a long silence, then the woman's voice said flatly, "So there your famous skills as a doctor are worse than useless."

"I'm sorry. To see such a skilled swordsman cut down in his prime...."

The woman's voice was bitter. "Apparently not skilled enough to defeat the Hitokiri Battousai."

"Ahhh.... Then he's lucky to be alive."

"LUCKY!? Unable to move hand or foot, and you call that lucky!?"

There was another silence, then the elderly man said quietly, "I've done what I can."

A loud, metallic clink echoed through the deserted house.

"Then take your money and go, old man. I never want to see you again!"

He heard the old man depart. Soft footsteps approached his room, then the door slid open. A shadowy form crept to his bedside.

"You... you... must have heard."

The injured man said nothing. Perhaps he would not.

Perhaps he could not.

The young woman picked up his limp hand -- a hand that bore the calluses of a expert swordsman -- and pressed it to her tear-stained cheek. In a choked voice, she whispered, "If... if you want me to... I... I will end... your suffering...."

She lifted her head. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling, open and unblinking. She couldn't tell whether he was simply ignoring her or whether he was unaware of her presence.

"It's... it's me... Junko! Please answer me!"

There was no response.

After a muffled sob, Junko said, "I... there's one last chance. If doctors can do nothing, perhaps SHE can. I'll... I'll be right back."

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A few hours later, the door to his room opened again. A hooded woman glided into the dimly lit room, carrying a long, thin bundle. She was followed by Junko. The woman murmured, "Leave us."

"But Aunt...."

"Leave us, girl," the hooded woman firmly repeated.

"....very well." Junko reluctantly departed.

Alone in the room with the injured man, the woman pushed back her hood. She was more handsome than beautiful, with a tired, careworn face. The woman stared down at the man on the futon.

"So.... Minobe Junichi, a promising swordsman of the third unit of the Shinsengumi, his career and life cut brutally short in a battle with the infamous Hitokiri Battousai." Her voice was cool, almost mocking.

The man did not respond.

"I know you can hear me perfectly well, nephew. It is only your body that is broken, not your mind."

There was finally a reaction from the injured man... a mere twitch of an eyebrow.

"But to the matter at hand." She sat down gracefully beside Junichi and said, "I tell you bluntly, nephew. I cannot heal your broken back and you will never walk again...." She gave him a bone-chilling smile. "...on this side of the grave."

She pulled the wrappings away from her bundle and held up a sheathed sword. Pulling it a few inches out of its sheath, she held it up, but the blade did not gleam. Instead, the matte black steel seemed to drain what little light was in the room.

"Do you recognize this fine weapon, boy? This sword has been a family treasure for over 400 years, but it has been used by only one man.... the legendary swordsman Minobe Koji. It was the atrocities he committed in his madness which gave this blade its name." She abruptly slid the blade back into its sheath with a snap.

"Kinslayer."

She leaned over him and said, "The only thing left for you now is revenge. How badly do you want that revenge?"

Junichi stared directly at her, his eyes glittering.

The woman's smile widened. "Good. I can see the hatred burning in your eyes. Then listen well, Minobe Junichi. You have two choices." She held up one bony finger. "You can chose to die now, freeing yourself from your crippled body... and also freeing your enemies from any threat of vengeance."

She held a second finger. "Or you can live. Tend your hatred carefully and feed it well, boy... become one with this blade, because only then will you have the skill to defeat the Hitokiri Battousai! If your desire for revenge is strong enough, your spirit and this sword will become one and the same. If you succeed...."

The elderly woman cackled softly. "When this useless flesh of yours eventually dies, this sword and this sword alone will help you to accomplish what your body in life could not... the destruction of the Hitokiri Battousai and the others who have wronged you. Do you understand, my nephew?"

For the first time in days, the young man's face moved. He smiled.

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In another part of the house, Junko had an unexpected visitor.

"Saitoh Hajime."

The tall, thin man with the lean, dangerous face said, "How is he?"

"He's ... crippled. His back was broken by the Hitokiri Battousai."

"Or by the fall off the bridge." Saitoh gave her a chilly smile.

Junko noticed that the captain of the third unit of the Shinsengumi looked both ill and exhausted.

"What happened to you?" she rudely asked.

He looked at her. "The same thing that happened to the whole squad. We were cornered on a bridge and it collapsed during the ensuing battle. Between the fighting, the falling debris, and the icy waters in the canal, some may say it's a miracle that any of us survived."

"And what of the Battousai?"

"Cunning as a fox and just as nimble... as always. He was long gone by the time the bridge gave way." He shrugged and turned to leave.

She jumped to her feet and yelled, "Is that it? Aren't you and the other Shinsengumi going to hunt down the Battousai and make him pay for what he did to my brother!?"

Saitoh gave her bored look and said, "Why should we do that? We have enough to do without spending valuable time on personal vendettas."

"How can you say that!? He's your comrade...!"

"Your brother was a fool and he disobeyed my direct orders. We had an important mission to complete. The last thing we needed was to have an encounter with the Ishin ShiShi forces, but Junichi deliberately attracted the Battousai's attention in some moronic attempt to gain a reputation for himself. His foolishness nearly got my entire unit killed."

"That's not true!"

"Believe what you like. I don't have time to waste arguing with half-witted girls. If he is crippled, you should give some thought to cutting his throat and putting him out of his misery. At least he'll have a relatively painless death. That might not be the case if some of your brother's so-called 'comrades' find him. My men are quite unhappy with all the trouble he caused us."

"Why can't you stop them!?" Junko shrieked.

Saitoh gave her a cold, cynical smile. "On the contrary. I think I'll praise them for their initiative."

He disappeared into the evening shadows, leaving behind a badly

frightened young woman. She crouched on the floor, shaking, until she realized that she was no longer alone.

"Junko."

She hastily rose to her feet and said respectfully, "Aunt."

"I could not but overhear you conversation with Captain Saitoh...."

"That cold-blooded bastard!"

"Oh, I quite understand his feelings. My nephew's a fool beyond measure. However, he's a fool who wants to continue living as long as possible. I suggest you leave this house and quickly, before the Shinsengumi arrive."

Junko gaped at her formidable aunt. "He wants to... live?"

Her aunt grabbed Junko's chin with cold, bony fingers. "Listen well, girl. Your brother has chosen to live, despite his injuries. It is your duty to ensure that he does. You are to protect and take care of him, no matter what it takes. Is that clear?"

"But...."

The cold fingers tightened their grip. "Your oath on it, girl!"

"Y-y-yes. I... I swear."

"Don't worry about the money. I'll tend to that. Now, get moving, Junko."

For the second time in less than an hour, Junko was left alone with her burdens and her fears.

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> [the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer] <p>

In the outskirts of Tokyo, a crippled middle-aged man died one night during a raging thunderstorm. No one except his sister knew or cared.

Minobe Junko was glad that her brother was finally dead... as dead as the love she had once had for him. When she gave her word to her aunt all those years ago, Junko had no idea that her brother Junichi would linger on for over a decade. And during that time, Junko's life had been stagnant and monotonous -- feed her brother, clean her brother,... over and over again. But all that changed a few months ago when she met and fell in love with Uboshita Sachi, a young man from a rich and influential family.

As long as her brother lived, marriage was out of the question. And although he was sick and crippled, Junichi could have still clung to life for another decade or more... and she wasn't getting any younger.

A pot of tea, a little white powder, and Junko was now a free woman.

She entered her brother's room for one last time. Sachi's mother had welcomed Junko into her home. She was eager to go.

(I'm never coming back here. Never.)

A dull gleam caught her eye and she noticed the sheathed sword lying on her dead brother's bed. He had clutched it in his crippled hands almost continuously for those thirteen years.

(What a waste of a fine weapon. I can't just leave it here and I don't want to take this ghastly thing with me. I know! I'll sell it and buy something nice for Sachi's birthday.)

She picked up the sword and admired the craftsmanship. It would fetch a good price. Junko tugged on the hilt and the black blade slid effortlessly out of its scabbard.

The room seemed to darken and shadows crawled across the walls.

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> (end of prologue) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: An unexpected meeting! ^\_^

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Part 1: Unexpected Encounters

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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

Strolling down the street, Kamiya Kaoru glanced at the girl beside her and said, "Misao, I'm glad you came to Tokyo for a visit."

The girl laughed and said, "Well, actually it wasn't entirely my idea. Jiya suggested it. I think he wanted me out of his beard for a while."

"Why?"

Misao sniffled. "Aoshi-sama."

"Oh.... I'm beginning to see. Uh, how is Aoshi?"

Flicking her braid over her shoulder, Misao said morosely, "He's... he's so quiet! No matter what I do,... no matter what I say,... All

he does is drink tea, meditate, and read books on Zen! I've tried and tried and tried to get him to smile, but nothing ever works! I've told him jokes, read him funny stories, dressed up in silly costumes,..."

Kaoru thought uneasily, (I'm beginning to understand why Okina suggested she take a little trip away from Kyoto!)

"But I refuse to give up! I'll going to make him smile... somehow!" There was a gleam of ferocious determination in Misao's eyes. "Aoshi-sama is like an injured bird, one that's forgotten how to fly. And I'm going to teach him, one way or another... even if it kills me!"

Kaoru laughed nervously, "That's... that's nice."

Catching the uneasy look on her friend's face, Misao relaxed and chuckled. "Oh, don't worry. I'm not going to do anything stupid. Patience and persistence. That's my motto! And Jiya was right. I did need to get away from Kyoto for a while."

"I'm glad you're enjoying your trip."

Misao said, "Well, I have to confess that it's not entirely all fun and games. I'm sort of playing errand girl."

"Oh? If you don't mind me asking...."

Misao's expression become somber. "One of Jiya's old friends was recently killed under very suspicious circumstances."

"Oh no!"

"Yes! Mr. Uboshita and his entire family were killed just about a week ago. And on the very same day of their deaths, his son's fiancée threw herself off a bridge and drowned, in full view of everyone on the street!" Misao frowned. "That was bad enough, but when I got here, I found out that they weren't the only suspicious deaths that have occurred recently."

Kaoru bowed her head. "Yes, I know. Everyone in Tokyo has been talking about it. In the last week, nearly thirty people have died. Five entire families!"

Misao nodded grimly. "And most killed by a sword."

"Yes. Chief Inspector Uramura has been by the dojo to talk to Kenshin...." Kaoru's voice trailed off.

The ninja girl blinked, then shouted, "The police don't think HIMURA had anything to do with this!?"

Kaoru shook her head emphatically. "No. They know that Kenshin couldn't possibly be responsible. One of the families were murdered at the exact same time Chief Uramura had his meeting with Kenshin."

"And was Himura able to tell them anything?"

"He went to take a look at the bodies, but...."



"But what!?"

"He said that there appeared to be only one, extremely skilled attacker. Kenshin also said that he had never seen that exact style before, but that some of the injuries reminded him of the work of the Shinsengumi."

"You don't mean to say that it's Saitoh...!"

Kaoru shook her head again. "No. It can't be him either. He has an even better alibi than Kenshin. He was apparently in Osaka meeting with government officials for the last several days. And... Saitoh may be a ruthless killer, but he doesn't kill without reason."

Misao muttered, "I suppose that's true. But there can't be that many master swordsmen or assassins around capable of doing this sort of work."

"I know. But what's even worse is the total lack of rhyme or reason to the deaths. I could see a rich and influential person like Mr. Uboshita having enemies, but two of the families were just ordinary shopkeepers. There doesn't seem to be any connection, so there's no way to predict who's the killer's next target. Then there's still the matter of the suicides."

Misao frowned. "All were members of the massacred families or close friends?"

"That's right. A mad killer is bad enough, but those suicides...." Kaoru shivered. "The police have been trying to hide the true extent of the problem to keep the public from panicking, but there are already rumors. People are trying to act like nothing's wrong, but you can feel the fear and tension in the air."

"Yeah. Everyone's twitchy."

There was a long silence, then Kaoru abruptly shook her head. "Listen to all this doom and gloom! You're here and we're going to have a celebration dinner."

Misao grinned and said, "Is this the reason for the long walk?"

"Yes, Tae told me about this little shop that has the best fish and shellfish in the city. Their merchandise is a bit expensive, but it's going to be worth it! Here we are." She stopped outside a prosperous looking store.

The ninja girl said, "Then I hope you're going to let Himura do the cooking.... Eep!" She clapped both hands over her mouth and nervously watched Kaoru.

She glared at Misao and muttered, "Hmph! Just because I'm not the best cook in the world...."

Inside the store, the shopkeeper was busy chatting with a female customer. The woman was not young, perhaps in her early thirties, but she had a serene, ageless sort of beauty that invited people to take

a second look. Beside her stood a young boy with spiky black hair. He was carrying a shinai slung over his shoulder.

For a startled moment, Kaoru thought it was Yahiko, then quickly realized that the boy was too tall and too scrawny to be her irritating pupil. When the boy turned and glanced at her, she was struck by the bleak stare and the harsh lines of the still young face.

(Such old eyes. Yahiko's had a hard childhood, but his eyes are nothing like this. This boy's seen truly terrible things....)

The boy suddenly blinked in surprise, then said, "Hey, it's the Weasel Girl!"

Misao turned bright red and yelled, "What do you mean 'weasel'... Eiji!?" Her jaw dropped open as she gave the boy a stupefied stare.

Kaoru said, "Uh, Misao? Do you know him?"

The ninja girl ignored Kaoru for the moment and blurted out, "What the hell are you doing here in Tokyo!?"

He scowled at her and muttered, "You're SO stupid! I live here now."

"Live here? In Tokyo?"

"Didn't I just say that? You're sounding like a brainless parrot!"

"But... but... I thought you were going to live with... with...," Misao babbled.

The boy said irritably, "I AM living with her!"

As the shopkeeper bustled away into his storeroom, the woman turned around and put her hand lightly on Eiji's shoulder. In a soft, gentle voice, she said, "Are these friends of yours?"

Eiji glanced up at the woman. Kaoru was astonished to see his scowl turn into a relaxed grin.

"Oh yeah. She's the Weasel Girl that I told you about."

The woman gave Kaoru and the still speechless Misao a warm smile. Her dark brown eyes were calm and patient, but there was also a faint twinkle in them which hinted at a playful sense of humor.

"So you're the girl who saved Eiji's life on more than one occasion. I would like to thank you very much."

Eiji snorted loudly as the woman gave Kaoru and Misao a deep bow and said, "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Fujita Tokio."

"T-T-Tokio!?" stuttered Misao, who looked like someone had hit her over the head with a brick.

Kaoru couldn't quite figure out why Misao was behaving so strangely. (Fujita? Fujita... why does that name seem so familiar?)

Misao continued to babble incoherently, her eyes bulging. "You're... you're... S-S-Saitoh's... Saitoh's...."

(Saitoh? What does Saitoh have to do with Fujita....)

"....w-w-wife....!?"

Kaoru's packages toppled to the ground. She turned to stare at Misao, who was still gaping like a beached fish.

"She's... she's...." It was Kaoru's turn to start babbling.

Misao slowly nodded.

In a strangled voice, Kaoru whispered, "You're Saitoh Hajime's... wife!?"

Tokio said mildly, "Yes, I am."

"Here you are, Fujita-san! I was saving those fish just for you!" The shopkeeper reappeared in the store. With a flourish and a deep bow, he handed Tokio a carefully wrapped package.

She gave him a happy smile and said, "Oh, thank you! They're one of my husband's favorites."

The shopkeeper turned to Kaoru and Misao. "Now, ladies, can I help you?"

"...."

"Uh, ladies? Would you like some fish? Clams? Shrimp? Squid?"

"...."

Eiji gave Misao a sharp nudge with his elbow. "Hey, stupid! The guy's talking to you!"

"Wha...?" the ninja girl mumbled.

Tokio walked up to Kaoru and said, "Excuse me, I didn't catch your name?"

"....Kamiya Kaoru....," she answered in a dazed voice.

In a gentle, coaxing voice, Tokio said, "What were you planning to buy?"

"Uh.... octopus... eels....."

Without appearing the least bit pushy, Tokio managed to get a hold of Kaoru's shopping list. A few minutes later, with Kaoru's purchases completed, Tokio deftly ushered the two young women out of the shop, leaving behind a very confused shopkeeper.

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Before she quite knew what hit her, Kaoru found herself standing in a quiet side street along with Misao, fresh seafood in hand. Eiji was holding Kaoru's other packages with a bored look on his face.

Kaoru said, "I'm sorry, Fujita-san. It's just that I can't imagine a man like Saitoh being married...." Her words came to an abrupt halt and she turned bright red. "I mean... that is... it's such a shock.... Oh dear, I'm making such a mess out of this...."

Tokio chuckled softly. In a placid voice, she said, "Don't worry, Kamiya-san. I've seen some much more extreme reactions before. My husband's known to be a little difficult to deal with at times."

Misao finally managed to get her mouth back in working order. "A little difficult, she says!"

"Misao!" Kaoru hissed angrily.

The ninja girl mumbled, "Sorry."

Before Misao could say anything else, there were faint shouting noises, followed by the distant sound of gunfire.

Misao immediately stiffened and said, "What the...?"

Several minutes passed, then they heard a crash and the sound of stumbling footsteps from around the corner. As Misao reached for her kunai, a fat, middle-aged man staggered into view, bleeding heavily. In one hand, he clutched a bloodied sword.

Kaoru dropped her package and snatched Eiji's shinai. Both she and Misao stepped protectively in front of Tokio and the boy.

The man didn't even seem to notice them. He stared down at the sword in his hand, then flung it down on the ground with an anguished cry. He babbled, "No... no... I didn't... I couldn't stop myself... I loved them! What have I done! WHAT HAVE I DONE!?!?"

With that final wail of despair, the man turned and charged head first into the nearby stone wall. The impact was strong enough to send blood flying.

"What are you doing!?" Misao shouted.

Kaoru jumped forward and grabbed the man in a frantic effort to stop him. He flung her aside and continued slamming his skull into the wall, over and over again. In front of their horrified eyes, he kept beating his head repeatedly against the unyielding stone, apparently hellbent on his own destruction.

There was a final, sickening crunch, then the man slowly sagged to the ground, his face now only a bleeding mass of bone and flesh.

As Kaoru slowly got to her feet and walked over to the mortally wounded man, Misao glanced away from the pathetic sight. She frowned as she noticed something odd about the bloodied weapon lying

discarded on the ground. She bent down to take a closer look.

(That's strange. I've never seen a black sword blade like this before....) The ninja girl reached out to pick it up.

With her hands on Eiji's shaking shoulders, Tokio quietly asked, "Is he dead?"

Kaoru stepped away from the man's body. "Yes... yes, he is. I... I don't understand. How can someone... DO... something like that to himself? How can someone... beat their own brains out?" She glanced around in a slight daze, then saw Misao kneeling on the ground, holding the man's sword.

"Misao, what do you have...."

Without warning, the ninja girl whirled and slashed upward. Only Kaoru's excellent reflexes kept her from being gutted as the razor sharp blade sliced across her stomach.

Staggering backward in both pain and shock, Kaoru fell against the wall, clutching at her belly. She could feel warm blood seeping between her fingers.

"MISAO... WHY!?"

Eiji yelled, "Have you gone crazy, you stupid bitch!" He tried to lunge at her, but was firmly held back by Tokio.

The hairs on the back of Kaoru's neck rose as the ninja girl chuckled softly.

"Why? Because I felt like it." With a pantherish leap, Misao jumped onto a nearby rooftop.

Her vision going dim, Kaoru shouted, "Where are you... going!? Misao!"

With her braid angrily lashing back and forth like the tail of a great cat, Misao tossed her head and said, "I'm going to give my love to my darling Aoshi-sama!" With those words, she disappeared from view.

The vicious little smile on the ninja girl's face and the maddened gleam in her blue eyes left Kaoru with no doubt of Misao's intentions.

As Tokio quickly moved to Kaoru's side to examine her injuries, the young woman frantically whispered, "She's going to try to kill him! And... she might... be able to do it! We have... to warn... Aoshi!"

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> (end of part 1) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: It's not exactly a roll in the hay for Aoshi. ^\_^

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Part 2: Pursuit and Prey

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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

Somehow, Tokio managed to flag down a passing carriage. Before anyone quite knew what happened, the wealthy carriage owner was falling over himself to be helpful to the beautiful lady with the injured companion. Of course he wouldn't mind letting her borrow his carriage for a few hours. Just send it back when she's through using it. A few bloodstains on the upholstery? No problem....

"Kamiya-san, I'll take you to a doctor...."

Kaoru grabbed Tokio's arm with a bloodied hand.

"Saitoh-san...."

"Yes?"

"Take me to Megumi... Takani Megumi. She's a doctor.... Please, it's very important!"

Tokio checked the long slash along Kaoru's stomach. It was bleeding steadily but not too heavily. Reapplying her makeshift bandage, she said, "All right, if it's not too far away."

She raised her voice slightly. "Driver? Do you know where a Dr. Takani lives?"

He said, "Oh yes! She's a very good doctor. Here we go." The driver snapped the reins and the horses headed off at a brisk trot.

Inside the carriage, Tokio held Kaoru against her and applied firm pressure on her wound. A very quiet Eiji sat on the opposite side of the carriage, clutching Tokio's and Kaoru's packages.

"Saitoh-san..., " Kaoru murmured.

"Call me Tokio."

Kaoru smiled weakly. "Then... you can hardly go on calling me Kamiya-san." She took a few deep breaths. "Tokio, no matter what happens, please make sure... that Megumi gets in touch with Kenshin and Sano. Tell them... that they have to... stop Misao. Something's... terribly wrong with her. Tell them to warn Shinomori Aoshi. She means to... kill him...."

"Yes, I will. Now relax, Kaoru."

The quiet confidence in Tokio's voice reassured Kaoru that no matter what happened, Kenshin would get her warning.

(I don't understand. Why are you doing this, Misao? What are you trying to do? Is she really capable of killing Aoshi? Does she have a chance of succeeding? Yes, she just might. He'd never expect an attack from her....)

As she fretted about Misao's inexplicable actions, Kaoru gradually slipped into unconsciousness.

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It had been a quiet morning at the clinic so Megumi took the opportunity to do a little reorganization of her medical supplies. She was trying to figure out just where to put that last stack of bandages when she heard the clatter of hooves outside the door.

A few seconds later, a man ran in and shouted, "Dr. Takani! There's an injured woman in the carriage!"

Megumi quickly ran outside and flung open the carriage door. Inside, there was a thin, almost scrawny boy. On the other side of the carriage was a beautiful woman who was holding a blood-soaked bandage against the stomach of a younger woman....

"Kaoru!" Megumi glanced to the other woman and demanded, "What happened to her!? Never mind! You can tell me later! You, driver! Help me get her inside!"

A few minutes later, Megumi had Kaoru in bed and was examining her wound. Fortunately, it wasn't too deep and was bleeding only sluggishly. She stared at the long clean slash and turned to Tokio.

"What was it? A knife or a sword?"

"It was a sword."

Megumi gasped sharply.

"She was very quick. If she hadn't managed to dodge, she would probably be dead."

"Yes.... It will require stitches, but she should recover without any complications."

"Takani-san. Kaoru insisted that I give you a message. She wants to you get in touch with Himura Battousai and warn him...."

Megumi interrupted before Tokio could finish speaking. "Warn him about what!?"

"I think it would be best if I explained things personally. The matter is somewhat complicated."

The doctor rushed over to the table and quickly scribbled out a note.

Sticking her head outside the clinic, she called one of the neighborhood boys over.

"You know Kenshin?" When the boy nodded, she said, "Give him this note right away. If you can't find him, get right back here. Run!"

Megumi watched the boy scamper off on his errand, then turned back toward the patiently waiting Tokio.

"I'm sorry, I haven't had an opportunity to thank you for taking care of Kaoru."

"I'm glad to help in any way I can."

"Well, I better take care of that wound."

However, before Megumi took another step, there was a tremendous commotion in the clinic as a whole crowd of people rushed in. One of the men was holding a severely bleeding child. The sound in the clinic was deafening as the child wailed, women cried, and men shouted. The only thing Megumi could figure out was that the child had an accident in his father's workshop.

She bit her lip. The child was much more badly hurt than Kaoru. If she should didn't do something immediately, the boy could die within minutes. Megumi turned to Tokio and said, "Excuse me, but could you keep an eye on Kaoru? Dr. Genzai's out of town visiting some patients and I have to deal with this first. Just make sure the bleeding doesn't get any worse...."

"Of course." Tokio gave Megumi a deep bow. "If you will forgive my presumption, but I do have some medical skill. If Kaoru's injury only needs stitching, then perhaps you will allow me to take care of it while you tend to the child?"

Megumi liked her quiet air of competence. An extremely loud scream from the boy made her decision easy. "Thank you! The supplies are in that cabinet. Excuse me!" She rushed over to the seething crowd of panicked people.

"Sir, put the child down here. No, let go of him! Please you have to give me room to work. Can you please get that woman out of here! I can't tell you how bad it is until I've had a chance to examine.... BE QUIET!!!"

-----

At the Kamiya Dojo, Yahiko was watching Kenshin absently washing the same shirt for the fifth time in the row.

(He's really out of it today. He's been like this ever since the Chief Inspector dropped by.)

Sano was sitting on the porch, chewing on a twig. He yelled, "Hey! Aren't you supposed to be scrubbing the floor or something?"

Yahiko stalked over to him and snarled, "I finished that an hour ago! So there! Bleeh!" and stuck out his tongue.



The sounds of the ensuing wrestling match barely registered on Kenshin's mind. He thought, (Something's not right. The sun's shining and there's only a few clouds in the sky... but it just doesn't feel right. I can almost smell the stench of death and violence in the air.... Just like Kyoto, all those years ago... when blood ran in the streets like rainwater....)

(Over thirty people dead in a week. But who can it be? It can't be Saitoh. This isn't his style at all... it's much too wasteful. But I definitely saw traces of Shinsengumi blade work....)

He glanced up as soon as he heard the patter of footsteps. A local boy ran into the compound and stopped in front of Kenshin, gasping heavily for air.

"Here... a... message... from Takani-... san.... Important...."

Yahiko and Sano stopped in mid-grapple and watched as Kenshin quietly rose to his feet and wiped his hands dry. He opened the note and started reading.

Sano dumped Yahiko on the ground as soon as he saw Kenshin's jaws clench and his hands tighten on the paper.

"What's up, Kenshin?"

Crumpling the note in one hand, Kenshin reached for his sakabatou and said in a flat voice, "It's a note from Megumi-dono. Kaoru-dono's been hurt."

As one, the three of them headed out of the Kamiya compound at a dead run.

-----

When they arrived, the clinic looked like a disaster area. There was blood all over the floor, hordes of people crying or shouting, and general chaos everywhere. Just as they entered the building, a thin boy ran past them out the door.

(That boy... looked familiar,) thought Kenshin, before concentrating on more important things like....

"Megumi-dono! Where's Kaoru-dono?"

The doctor glanced up at them with a harried look on her face. She snapped, "Didn't you get my message? Her injuries aren't life-threatening. However, this boy's injuries ARE. Sano! I don't care how you do it, but get these fools out of here! I can't work with all this commotion! Yahiko, get me a basin of cold water!"

"Ah... right." The boy scurried off while Sano started to haul away various people.

"Where's Kaoru-dono?"

"She's over in the other room." Megumi jerked her head toward the back of the clinic.

Kenshin swiftly walked to the door and flung it open. The first thing he saw was Kaoru, lying pale and still on the bed. There was another woman in the room, who was just drying her hands.

He closed the door behind him, shutting out the shouting and other noise. Kenshin sank down beside the bed and gently grasped Kaoru's wrist. He could feel her pulse under his fingers... a bit fast, but reassuringly steady. He sighed quietly and closed his eyes in relief.

"She'll be fine with some rest."

Kenshin glanced up at the woman standing next to the bed. She gave him a gentle smile in return.

"I see."

"Excuse me, but you are Kenshin, correct?"

"Yes. Why...."

Tokio gave him a polite bow and said, "Then I have an very important message and a warning for you from Kaoru."

He rose to his feet and said, "What is it?"

Behind him, Sano and Yahiko rushed into the room. Sano said, "How's Jo-chan...."

Kenshin made a sharp gesture. "Sano. Wait a moment." Turning back to Tokio, he said, "What is the warning?"

"She said that you must stop Misao from killing Shinomori Aoshi."

-----

They stared at Tokio for a long moment, before Sano blurted, "That's crazy! I don't know who the hell you are, lady, but you've got no idea what or who you're talking about!"

"Yeah!" chimed in Yahiko.

Tokio didn't appear to be the least bit offended by their comments. She patiently waited for Kenshin to respond.

In even tones, he said, "Why would Misao do such a thing?"

She bowed her head. "I don't know. I met Kaoru and Misao for the very first time this morning. I can only tell you what I saw."

"Which is?"

"I saw Misao attack her friend Kaoru with no apparent provocation."

"Hold it! You mean to tell us that MISAO did this to Jo-chan!?"

"Yes."

Sano reached out and grabbed a hold of Tokio's wrist. She gasped quietly, but didn't try to struggle. Clutching the front of her kimono with his other hand, he hauled her halfway into the air and snarled, "I don't know what your game is, you lying little bitch...."

"She's not lying," a weak voice whispered.

Kenshin was instantly kneeling by Kaoru's side. "Kaoru-dono! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. And it's all true. One moment she was fine and the next moment, Misao tried to kill me." Tears shimmered in her eyes. "Kenshin, something's horribly wrong with her! I don't know what's going on, but she really means to kill Aoshi! I could see it in her eyes! You have to stop her!" She struggled to sit up, but Kenshin gently pushed her back down again.

"Fine, we'll take care of that. You just rest, Kaoru-dono."

Lying against the pillows, Kaoru gave them a faint smile. Her eyes abruptly widened as she saw what Sano was doing. With a definite expression of panic, she yelped, "Sano, you idiot! What are you doing!? Let go of her!"

"Huh?"

"Baka! She's Saitoh Hajime's WIFE!"

Dead silence followed.

Sano stared blankly at Kaoru's anxious face. Without even noticing, his hand opened and dropped Tokio. She landed on the floor with a hard thump. She sat there for a moment, giving them all a faintly bemused look.

With a stunned expression, Kenshin stammered, "You're... you're... T-T-Tokio!?"

"....duhhh...", was Yahiko's only comment.

Tokio slowly got to her feet, discretely rubbing her sore hip. She edged away from a still frozen Sano and gave them an exquisitely graceful bow.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Saitoh Tokio. I've heard a great deal about you, Himura Battousai."

"You've GOT to be kidding, Jo-chan," mumbled Sano.

"Do I look like I'm joking!?"

Tokio coughed delicately and said, "Um, about Misao...?"

Kenshin shook his head rapidly. Shocking as this discovery was, they had much more serious things to worry about. "Kaoru-dono, is there anything else I need to know right now?"

"No, that's it. I can tell you the rest when you get back."

"Sano! We need to get a message to Kyoto right away! Yahiko, stay here with Kaoru-dono."

Getting no response from Sano, Kenshin ended up forcibly dragging the still stupefied man out of the clinic.

-----

As they ran down the streets, Sano muttered, "I don't believe it! It can't be! How can an total, psychotic bastard like Saitoh be MARRIED!?!? It's impossible! Someone's playing a bad joke on me...."

Kenshin said, "No. It's true. So that's Tokio."

Sano gave his friend an accusing stare. "You knew!? And you didn't tell me!?"

"It didn't seem that important..., " Kenshin mumbled.

"I still don't believe it.... Naw, can't be.... Uh, Kenshin? Just where are we headed, anyway?"

With a grim look on his face, the swordsman replied, "To one of the Oniwabanshuu message centers. They have carrier pigeons. I'm not sure what's going on, but we need to put Okina and Aoshi on guard."

"Oh, I get it!"

-----

Kenshin abruptly skidded to a stop in front of a small shop and put his hand on the hilt of his sakabatou.

"What's wrong, Kenshin?" Sano whispered.

"I smell... fresh blood," was the quiet reply.

"Oh hell...."

They circled around to the backyard. There was a large wooden shed, its door smashed open. Kenshin carefully pushed it open a bit further.

The room was littered with gray feathers and the corpses of dead pigeons.

Kenshin said, "We're too late."

"Do... do you think that Misao did this?"

"I don't know. It's a strong possibility. The person who did this was good. Most of these birds have been sliced cleanly in half, probably while on the wing."

"So what do we do now?"

"The Oniwabanshuu must have more than one station of carrier pigeons in Tokyo, but I don't know where they might be."

"The pigeon handler... do you think... Misao killed him?"

Kenshin sighed, "I don't know. I can't imagine Misao trying to kill Kaoru-dono or Aoshi, but Kaoru-dono and Tokio-dono both said.... We need to concentrate on finding her first. Once we've done that, maybe we can figure out what's really going on."

As they stepped back into the street, they saw an elderly man trudging in their direction. The man stopped suddenly, then quickly walked forward. "Himura-san! What can I do for you today?"

"Where have you been?"

The man blinked. "I just stepped out to get some food."

"Have you seen Misao?"

"No, I haven't. And I have an important message for her."

"What is it?"

The man blinked. "Uh..."

"It's very important! Something terribly wrong has happened to Misao and we need to get in touch with Okina and Aoshi as soon as possible!"

"Well, certainly, I'll send a message to Okina right away...."

"You can't. Someone's slaughtered all the pigeons. And I suspect that if you had been here, you would have suffered the same fate."

"What!?"

"You must have an alternate way of getting in touch with Kyoto!"

"Yes, yes. I'll take care of it right away. But don't worry about Aoshi-sama."

Kenshin frowned. "Why not?"

"He's already on his way here. He should be arriving either today or tomorrow...."

"WHAT!?" Kenshin and Sano both shouted.

"Yes, I was about to forward that message to Misao."

"Where is the actual message? The one delivered by the pigeon?"

"In the shed. Why?" the old man said.

A few minutes later, their worst fears were confirmed. The message was missing.

Sano said, "Kenshin, do you think...?"

"If she's found it, Misao will know he's coming. And there's no way to warn him!"

Kenshin turned back to the old man. "Is there a special trail that the Oniwabanshuu prefer to use between Kyoto and Tokyo?"

Unnerved by Kenshin's urgency, the old man said, "Uh, yes, there is. It's a forest track that runs parallel to the Toukai Way."

"Come on, Sano! She can't be more than a hour or two ahead of us. We have a chance of catching up with her, especially if she decides to wait in ambush." Armed with the old man's detailed directions, they set off in the direction of Kyoto.

"Kenshin, what are we going do when we find her?"

"I don't know, Sano."

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[Kyoto, five days earlier]

Okina walked into Aoshi's room and said, "I would like you to go to Tokyo."

Aoshi glanced up from his book, but said nothing.

"You know I sent Misao away for a little vacation. Aside from the fact that she was driving everyone crazy with her antics, she was also supposed to check with our local agents about the suspicious deaths of my old friend Uboshita and his family."

Aoshi nodded impassively.

"I just received news of more suspicious deaths. Another fifteen, to be exact."

"What?" Aoshi looked visible surprised.

Okina nodded grimly. "All dead within the last two days. Which brings the current total to over twenty. Three entire families and close friends... all killed by the sword. Something's going on in Tokyo and I don't like it. I don't like the idea of Misao wandering around alone in that mess."

Aoshi glanced down at his hands. "She's hardly unprotected, considering that she's staying with Himura Battousai."

"But you know Misao. She's as curious as a cat. And like a cat, she's liable to go snooping a bit too far and a bit too carelessly. Besides, I think Himura has more than enough to do keeping an eye on Kaoru and that scamp Yahiko. I would prefer that you were there to keep Misao out of trouble."

Aoshi was silent for a long moment. Okina could only guess at the thoughts going on in the young man's head. Finally, Aoshi uttered a faint sigh. "Very well. I'll leave after lunch."

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> (end of part 2) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: Aoshi finds out just how sharp Misao's claws can be. ^\_^

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THAT WHICH LINGERS: A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra

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Part 3: Cat Scratch Fever

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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

Makimachi Misao was in the mood for mayhem and murder. Perched in a tree overlooking the forest path favored by the Oniwabanshuu, she waited impatiently for her victim to show up.

(It's destiny, I suppose. I didn't even have to travel all the way back to Kyoto to finish the fool off. Instead, he's walking right into my lap.) She chuckled evilly and admired that lethal black sword in her hands.

(Just you wait, Aoshi....)

She suddenly stiffened as she saw a familiar figure, dressed in a trenchcoat swiftly making his way toward her. As she concealed herself in the thick summer foliage, she could barely keep herself from quivering with anticipation.

There was a small dip in the path and Aoshi disappeared from view. She waited eagerly for him to reemerge.

Nothing.

After a few minutes, she snarled impatiently and hopped down from the tree.

(Isn't just like that bastard to screw up a perfectly good ambush!)

She carefully searched both sides of the track and soon located exactly where Aoshi had gone. Misao clutched the sword tighter and set off after him.

-----

Shinomori Aoshi had plenty of reasons to go to Tokyo. They weren't necessarily pleasant reasons, but that didn't matter. This brief side

trip was long overdue. He should have come here much sooner, but he keep postponing the journey. Now there were no more excuses.

He made his way along a barely noticeable track. It was hard to believe to that he travelled this same path just over two months ago. Two months... two totally different men. The Shinomori Aoshi of early May had been nothing more than a hollow shell, utterly consumed by his quest for the title of the "Strongest" and his pursuit of Himura Battousai.

He sighed wearily and glanced up at the blue sky. (And who is the Aoshi of today? What kind of person am I?)

That brief look upward saved his life as a slim figure dropped from the trees with an angry scream.

Aoshi flung himself aside. When he rolled to his feet, he was holding his two kodachi, ready to meet his attacker. But the sight that met his eyes left him totally dumbfounded.

"MISAO!?"

She glared furiously at him, a katana with an eerie black blade in her hands.

"What are you doing!?"

Misao's only response was a lightning swift lunge. Aoshi barely managed to fend off the attack, staggering backward a few steps from the sheer force of the attack.

(What the....!? That's impossible! She's moving nearly as fast as the Battousai! And where is she getting that strength!?)

The next instant, Aoshi was too busy trying to survive the lethal storm of thrusts and slashes Misao unleashed.

(This can't be happening! Misao knows how to use a sword, but there's no way she could have gotten THIS skilled!)

"Misao! What's wrong with you? What are you doing!?"

She sprang out of range and chuckled viciously. "What am I doing? Isn't that obvious, my dear Aoshi-SAMA!? I'm trying to rip your stupid guts out!"

Aoshi shook his head. The whole encounter was taking on the aspect of some horrible nightmare.

"Why....?"

"Why? WHY!? Because I HATE YOU, YOU FILTHY STINKING BASTARD!!!"

He flinched from the sheer rage in her voice.

"Misao, I...."

"I don't want to hear it! You don't care about me! You never cared about me! You're a selfish, traitorous coward and you deserve to DIE!"



Misao lifted her sword and held it horizontal, then charged.

Aoshi, stunned both by her verbal attack and what he was seeing, barely managed to parry Misao's thrust, but couldn't move quickly enough to fully block the sweeping side slash that opened a deep cut down his right leg.

(That's... that was a version of Saitoh's Gatotsu!)

"You're wrong, Misao! I... I...." (I do care about you....)

Misao hissed furiously, "Don't you DARE say care about me! You deserted me without so much as a second look, just so you could run around and feed your damn ego with all that 'glorious Oniwabanshuu' crap! It's all your fault Hannya and the others died!"

"No...."

She came in low and stabbed upward. Aoshi lashed out with a kick and nearly lost his leg to her incredibly fast counterattack.

Misao shouted, "You knew that they'd follow you wherever you went! You were the one who hired yourself out like some damn whore to that drug dealer Kanryu! Don't try to tell me that you didn't know EXACTLY what sort of cowardly scum he was! You knew, but you just didn't care! All you were concerned about was the chance to play around with the Battousai!"

In a blur, she slipped behind him. He spun away, but not before she managed to inflict another deep cut on his shoulder.

"And then you betrayed us by getting all cozy with Shishio just because you were too stupid and too lazy to find the Battousai by yourself! You abandoned us without a second thought! You probably would've led the the attack on the Aoiya yourself if you thought it would get you closer to Himura! Don't lie to me! I know it's true! You would have!"

Aoshi dazedly shook his head. (Would I have actually done that? Instead of just turning my back on them, would I have attacked them... killed them.... I might have.... I was ready to do anything, no matter how ruthless.... I... I don't know!)

Misao stood across the small clearing, panting slightly, but she was clearly in much better shape than Aoshi who was bleeding from several wounds.

"Last, but not least, you're a damn coward! After Himura managed to pound some sense into that thick skull of yours, what do you do? Crawl away and hide! That's all you did... all you've ever done. You act so cold and controlled, but all you are is a snivelling coward! I can't believe that Hannya, Beshimi, Shikijyou, and Hyottoko all died to save your miserable, worthless hide! Well, I'm tired of all your shit! If you're too scared to live, then I'll be happy to bury you myself!!!"

(Is... is she right? Is that all I am? Did Hannya and the others sacrifice their lives to protect a selfish coward?) He felt his guard slipping, then suddenly shook his head. (No. I've got to get myself

together. This... this isn't right. This isn't Misao. I have to stop her... but can I? I don't know where all this skill, speed, and strength is coming from... I can't afford to hold back if I want to survive... but Misao could die....)

Aoshi had no more time to think as Misao pounced toward him, launching a furious series of strikes. He managed to parry or evade most of her attacks, but his reluctance to take the offensive proved his undoing as a last, vicious blow broke several ribs and sent him crashing through the undergrowth. His head slammed into something hard and everything went black.

-----

/ Okashira, wake up! /

(Wha...?) A misty form with a familiar demon face seemed to materialize before Aoshi's eyes. (Hannya!? No, it can't be!)

/ Yes, it is I. /

(I'm sorry. It seems as if all of you wasted your lives saving a selfish fool of a coward.)

/ No! You merely lost your way for a while, but you are finding your way back. These things take time. /

(I think I'll be joining you quite soon....)

/ Okashira, listen to me! You can't die, especially by Misao's hand. It would destroy her utterly. If you want to save her, you have to stop her, no matter what it takes. /

(I don't want... to hurt her anymore.)

/ Sometimes that can't be helped. /

(If I make a mistake, I could kill her....)

/ It could come to that. /

(NO! I can't!)

/ If you fail, our Misao will be dead... as dead as if you stabbed her through the heart,... perhaps more so. /

(....)

/ Do you care about her enough to run the risk of killing her in order to save her from a much worse fate? /

(Like what?)

/ Madness. Damnation. /

(....yes.... What do I have to do?)

/ Get that sword away from her. /

(I see. Hannya?)

/ Yes? /

(The others... are they... here?)

Three more shadowy shapes appeared in his vision... blurry but instantly recognizable. Aoshi heard no words from them, but he could sense both their support and their urgency.

(All right. Himura made a promise to bring me back, no matter what the cost. Hannya... Beshimi... Shikijyou... Hyottoko.... I make you THIS promise. I'll bring our Misao back, no matter what it takes.... )

-----

Misao jumped into the clearing and sneered at Aoshi as he lay on the ground. "That's pathetic! I was hoping to play with you some more, but I can see that it's just a waste of time." She lifted her sword, then stopped as Aoshi slowly rose to his feet.

"Not... so fast." He could feel the blood trickling through his hair and down his neck. He was steadily losing blood from his other wounds, also. He would have only this one chance.

"Oh, now you're getting serious?" Misao snarled.

"Yes."

"Then come on... if you dare, coward!"

Aoshi silently flipped his grip on his two kodachi, then turned them over, presenting the back edge of the blades.

She narrowed her eyes, but didn't move. They stared unblinkingly each other.

(Misao knows she can outwait me. I'm losing too much blood. If this goes on, I'll be too weak....)

Suddenly there was a snapping noise in the undergrowth. Misao's attention was shifted ever so slightly and Aoshi made his move. With every bit of speed he could muster, he pounced. His kodachi attack broke Misao's two handed grip on her sword. He twisted and brutally yanked the hand that was still holding the sword off to the side. Aoshi was all too aware that Misao's other hand was free, but he concentrated all his attention on breaking her grip on the black sword. Even with all his effort, he was losing to Misao's unnatural strength.

Steeling himself, he slammed her arm across his knee and felt her bones crack. The blade dropped from her hand as Misao screamed in pain. That scream was echoed by Aoshi as he felt the enraged girl plunge one of her kunai deep into his side with her free hand. Somehow he managed to both punch the struggling girl unconscious and kick the sword across the clearing before finally passing out, still tightly clutching Misao's broken arm.

The clearing was silent, except for a faint, dripping noise.

-----  
Misao slowly awoke to an agonizing pain in her left arm and a slightly lesser pain in her jaw.

(What... what's going... on? Oh, I hurt....)

She gradually became aware of a warm body lying on top of her... a man's body. Misao squinted until the face came into focus.

"Aoshi-....sama? AOSHI-SAMA!?"

And then, to her utter astonishment, the moment she had been waiting for so long arrived.... he opened his eyes and smiled at her... REALLY smiled at her.

In a faint, breathless voice, he whispered, "Misao... you're... back...."

"You're smiling... you're smiling at me!"

"Yes... I guess... I am." He closed his eyes as his grip on her injured arm slackened.

Misao watched in horror as Aoshi's quiet sigh turned into a moist cough. Blood seeped from his mouth and splashed her cheek. Only then, she realized that there was warm liquid dripping all over her stomach. With a growing sense of dread, she touched the wet spot and looked at her hand.

It was covered in dark red blood.

"Aoshi-sama! Aoshi!" Getting no response, she struggled to wiggle out from under his limp body. Once free, she carefully turned Aoshi over. The amount of blood he was losing appalled her.

And sticking out of his side was one of her own throwing knives.

The memory of the last few hours hit Misao with a vengeance.

"NO!!! Aoshi, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!!!" Tears mixing with the blood on her face, she clutched at Aoshi's body and started to sob hysterically.

"Mi... sao...."

She choked back her tears and leaned close to him. "Yes, Aoshi-sama?"

"Is... that... any... way... the Okashira... of... the Oniwa... banshuu... should... act?"

Misao took a few gulping breaths and said, "R-right.... I... I need to get some help! But... but it's too dangerous to leave you alone in the forest!"

Aoshi smiled again... another small but genuine smile.

"I think... this spot... is probably... the safest place... in Japan... for me. And... yes, I... care... about... you. A lot.... Get going.... Misao." He quietly passed out again.

Misao staggered to her feet and looked around in confusion.

(He... cares...?) Since her mind wasn't up to dealing with that particular topic at the moment, Misao concentrated on the first part of his statement. (What on earth is Aoshi-sama talking about? What's so special about this place?)

Then she noticed the short standing stones in the clearing.

Four of them.

In a neat row.

With a low mound of earth next to each stone.

Misao collapsed to her knees next to Aoshi's wounded body. As her eyes drifted from the smallest mound which was the size of a child to the largest which was large enough to contain ten men, her voice was the softest of whispers.

"It... it can't be! Beshimi... Hannya... Shikijyou... Hyottoko...."

The rustling leaves in the summer breeze sounded like a murmur of reassurance.

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> (end of part 3) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: Call 911! Call 911! ^\_^

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THAT WHICH LINGERS: A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra

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Part 4: Stained Hands and Hearts

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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

Misao shook herself out of her brief daze. She instinctively reached to remove the kunai in Aoshi's side, then stopped.

(No, I can't! That blade might be the only thing stopping him from bleeding to death!)

She bent down and gently brushed her right hand against Aoshi's cheek. It already felt frighteningly cool. She pulled herself to her feet and quickly looked for something she could use to splint her broken arm. As her eyes fell on the black sword, lying in a patch of shadow, Misao shuddered in revulsion. The blade that had appeared so interesting... almost enticing... a few hours ago now made her feel sickened and unspeakably dirty. Giving the weapon a wide berth, she continued her search. Once she finished splinting her arm, Misao took one last look at Aoshi and the four graves in the clearing, before setting off on the fastest run of her life.

It didn't matter that every step jolted her broken arm. It didn't matter that every muscle and joint in her body throbbed and ached. The only thought on her mind was the frantic hope that there wouldn't be a fifth grave in that clearing.

-----

Kenshin skidded to a stop in the middle of the trail so suddenly that Sano barely managed to avoid running over him.

"Kenshin! What are you doing?" Sano's voice trailed off at the look of shock and despair on his friend's face.

"We're... too late...."

"HUH!?" Sano spun around just in time to see Misao appear over the top of the small ridge in front of them.

She was covered in fresh bloodstains.

Misao staggered to a halt as soon as she saw Kenshin and Sano standing in front of her. Relief and exhaustion nearly drove her to her knees, but she managed to keep running toward them.

Kenshin noticed that she appeared to be unarmed but he watched her warily as the totally distraught girl grabbed at his kimono with her good hand.

"HIMURA!!! AOSHI-.... AOSHI-SAMA!!! I... I..." Misao erupted into tears and sagged to her knees.

Kenshin grabbed a hold of her shoulders and shook her hard. "Misao! What happened? Why did you do it!?"

She stared up at him, then her eyes widened. "I... attacked.... K-K-Kaoru! Is... is she all right!? No... not her, too!"

Kenshin gave Sano a swift glance. His grip on her shoulders gentled as he softly said, "She's going to be fine, Misao. You didn't injure her seriously."

A heaving sob was her only response.

"Misao, you have to tell me. What happened to Aoshi?"

She took a few gulping breaths, then blurted out, "I... I... I might have killed him! He's bleeding so badly! If he doesn't get to a

doctor soon, he'll DIE!"

Sano wondered, (Is that possible? Except for that broken arm, she doesn't look like she's got any other injuries. Could she have taken out Aoshi and gotten off so lightly?)

Misao jumped to her feet and started dragging Kenshin in the direction from which she came.

-----

Barely a quarter hour later, they were standing in the clearing where Aoshi lay, pale and unmoving. As Misao sank down beside him, Sano took a look and muttered, "Hell, he's a mess! I can't believe that a scrawny little thing like Misao could do so much damage, even if he didn't want to fight back! She doesn't seem strong enough or fast enough...."

Kenshin said quietly, "She's not. Misao's good, but she's no match for Aoshi. He should have been able to subdue her without too much trouble. Sano, can you get back to Tokyo?"

"Of course I can! What do you mean by that!? Besides, we're practically in view of the city."

"If his injuries weren't so severe, you could just carry him, but...."

"Leave it to me. I'll find a cart or something. Just stay here and I'll be back as soon as I can!"

Kenshin nodded briskly and noted with relief that Sano actually seemed to know where he was going. As he walked toward Misao, he suddenly gasped as he realized exactly what lay in the clearing.

Misao whispered, "Yes.... This must be where Hannya and the others are buried. That's why he left the trail.... I was hoping to see their graves someday... but not like this!" Her shoulders quivered as she tried fought back her sobs.

Kenshin gently moved her fumbling fingers aside and did his best to stop Aoshi from bleeding to death before help arrived.

In a gentle voice, he said, "Misao. Please tell me. What happened? Why did you suddenly attack both Kaoru-dono and Aoshi?"

She clutched at her knees and whispered, "I don't know! Kaoru and I were shopping, then we ran into...."

"Saitoh Hajime's wife, Tokio... right?"

Misao chuckled weakly and tried to wipe away the tears on her face. "Yeah.... You should have seen Kaoru's face...." A fragile smile appeared, then quickly vanished. A stunned look appeared on Kenshin's face as she went on to describe the encounter with the suicidal madman who had pounded his own brains to a pulp.

Seeing the sword she mentioned, Kenshin got up and walked over to it as Misao continued her story.

"Then... then I went to take a look at his sword... it was weird... all black, with no shine at all!"

Kenshin glanced down at the bloody weapon. He had never seen a sword with such a totally non-reflective finish.

"I picked it up and then.... I don't know! It all got so hazy after that...." She turned around just in time to see Kenshin picking up the black katana. "NO! HIMURA!!! Don't touch it! It's EVIL!!!"

Holding the sword in his hand, he gave Misao a startled look. "What?" He calmly held it up in the afternoon sunlight. It was an exceptional weapon, a masterpiece perfect in both edge and balance. But aside from its unusual appearance, Kenshin couldn't detect anything strange or uncanny about the blade.

Misao looked totally bewildered. "You don't... you don't feel it?"

Kenshin mutely shook his head.

"I... I don't understand. There's something horrible about... about that THING! I'm not imagining it, Himura!" She started to shake. "Or... or maybe I am... maybe I'm going crazy...." Misao began to giggle hysterically.

Kenshin plunged the sword into the ground and ran over to her side. "Misao! Got a hold of yourself! I don't know what's going on, but I don't think it's just you! There's must be something else going on and we need to find out what it is. Please, Misao! Aoshi needs you to be strong...."

She gasped quietly for several moments, then she whispered, "Himura... you can't imagine the terrible things I said to him. They... they all came spilling out of me... like... like maggots out of a rotten carcass! All this anger... bitterness... it was so UGLY." She rubbed her hands together as if trying to wipe both the dried blood and some unseen dirt away.

"He finally... finally SMILED at me... and... and he said... that... that he... cared about me." She suddenly flung her good arm around Kenshin and wailed, "I don't want to lose him NOW!!! After all we've been through... I CAN'T lose him now!!!"

As Kenshin gently held a weeping Misao, his gaze drifted back to the black sword as it stood, protruding from the ground.

(I don't know why I can sense nothing strange about it, but I can't believe that Misao just went insane for no reason at all. Something caused her to behave this way. A matte black sword... perfect for wielding in the shadows.... It's the key to this mystery... but how?)

-----

It was nearly evening by the time they managed to transport Aoshi back to Dr. Genzai's clinic. Megumi's lips had thinned when she recognized her patient, but she said nothing and set about working



with her usual brisk efficiency.

Tokio was still there, patiently tending to matters that the overworked Megumi simply did not have time to handle. As Megumi struggled to save Aoshi's life, Tokio took custody of the distraught Misao, set and resplinted her broken arm, cleaned her up, found her new clothes, and simply held her through the occasional bouts of uncontrolled weeping.

Firmly banished from Megumi's work area, Misao said, "Do... do you think I can see... Kaoru?"

"I don't see why not," murmured Tokio and led the ninja girl to Kaoru's room.

Misao stood, frozen in the doorway, before rushing over to Kaoru's side. She fell to her knees and gasped, "I... I'm so SORRY!!!"

Kaoru gently stroked the girl's unbraided hair. "There's nothing to be sorry for. I know it wasn't really you who tried to hurt me. Shhhh... shhhh."

The door opened and Kenshin quietly slipped into the room. He was carrying something hastily wrapped in a sturdy cloth.

"Kenshin... how's Aoshi?"

Misao froze tensely as she awaited his reply.

"Megumi is just finishing up. She can't make any promises, but it looks like he'll recover."

The ninja girl went limp with relief.

"Kaoru-dono, Tokio-dono... Misao told me what happened this morning. I just wanted to make sure." He partially unwrapped the bundle to expose the black sword. "Is this the same sword the man dropped?"

Kaoru gasped when she caught sight of the blade. "It's... it's magnificent!"

Misao merely buried her head in the blankets and refused to even look at the weapon.

Tokio cocked her head slightly. "Yes. I'm fairly sure it's the same one."

"What are you going to do with it, Kenshin?" Kaoru asked.

Rewrapping the sword, Kenshin sighed quietly. "I'm not sure. I need to take a better look at it. Maybe it has some clues to what happened."

Tokio murmured, "It's getting late and I'm sure Megumi's too tired to do any cooking. If you'll excuse me, I'll prepare some dinner for everyone. We have all that excellent seafood. It would be a pity to waste it."

Kenshin gave her a deep bow and said, "Thank you, Tokio-dono, for dinner and for all your help."

"I'm glad to be of any assistance I can."

When she left the room, Kaoru said, "She's such a kind, sweet-tempered person. I can't imagine what living with someone like Saitoh must be like!"

They each tried to picture what life in the Saitoh household must be like, then they all shook their heads and muttered, "Nah...."

-----

At that moment, Fujita Goro -- better known as Saitoh Hajime, Mibu's Wolf, and many other less complimentary names -- arrived home from his trip to Osaka. He took one last drag at his cigarette, then ground it out.

(So much for that.)

Even before he stepped in the door, he knew Tokio was not home. When she wasn't around, the house seemed eerily empty, even though there were a few servants and that boy Eiji lurking around.

"She left you a note," a sullen voice said. "Here."

Saitoh took the message. As he read it, he scowled slightly. Refolding the note, he gave Eiji a cool stare and said, "What happened?"

-----

Casual passersby could barely keep themselves from drooling as they caught a whiff of the mouth-watering aromas that drifted from Dr. Genzai's clinic.

Kaoru insisted that she was well enough join the others at dinner. Misao had to be dragged from Aoshi's side and was fidgeting impatiently for dinner to be over and done with.

"But I want to keep an eye on Aoshi-sama!"

"Listen to me, Misao! You're even paler than Kaoru at the moment and you can barely move as it is!" Megumi scolded her.

"No, I'm fine...."

"Misao, you have a broken arm, you probably haven't eaten anything since breakfast, and you're totally exhausted! You need both food and rest! Get something to eat and I'll make you a place to sleep in Aoshi's room. All right?"

As the ninja girl reluctantly nodded, Sano took a deep breath and sighed. "Man, that woman has to be a goddess! I've never smelled stuff so good!"

Yahiko muttered, "Yeah. If she always cooks like this, how on earth

does Saitoh stay so skinny?" His hand sneaked out to grab a dumpling and promptly got smacked by Kaoru.

"Ow! "

"You should wait, you greedy pig!" Kaoru snapped.

Megumi sank down into a tired heap on the floor. "Tokio-san, you're a lifesaver! I don't think I can boil water right now."

"It's nothing." Tokio stepped out of the kitchen and brought out the last plate of perfectly grilled fish. As everyone thanked her enthusiastically for her efforts, the door to the clinic abruptly slid open.

Tokio smiled happily and executed a graceful bow, food plate still in hand.

"Hajime-san! You're back just in time. I've cooked one of your favorites."

There were muffled thuds as various people toppled over in shock.

The tall, lean figure silhouetted in the doorway uttered a faint, almost rueful sigh.

(I don't know how she does it.... I'm almost afraid to ask.)

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(end of part 4)

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: Next, the Dinner Show! ^\_^

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2. Parts 05-08

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Rurouni Kenshin - "That Which Lingers" (Parts 5-8) by Madamhydra

This story is set in my own ALTERNATE REALITY universe which I've called "The Nightwitch Tales" -- think of it as Rurouni Kenshin mixed

with various supernatural and paranormal elements. Other stories in this alternate reality are: "Night Visitor"; "All in the Family"; "Romancing the Wolf"

WARNING: This story is "semi-dark" -- it has dark elements (violence, profanity, etc.) but it's not a darkfic! Actually, there's quite a bit of romance in it.... ^\_-

This story takes place after the end of the Kyoto story arc. After that, it takes a sharp left turn into its own world. Elements of the Revenge story arc may or may not show up later on in the story. The Kenshin Gumi already know that Saitoh survived the destruction of Shishio's stronghold.

As always, C&C is greatly appreciated! ^\_^

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THAT WHICH LINGERS: A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra

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Part 5: Two Hearts As One

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> Disclaimer<br>

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> Text Conventions<br>

( ) are character thoughts

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\* ----- \* marks the start and end of flashbacks

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[ ] denote visual or time notes

\*\*\*\*\*

[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

The people gathered in the main room of Dr. Genzai's clinic -- Kaoru,

Kenshin, Sano, Yahiko, Megumi, Misao -- stared blankly as Tokio calmly put out another place setting for her husband.

Through the open doorway, Saitoh Hajime could see Shinomori Aoshi sleeping in the adjacent room. He glanced at Misao and said, "I heard you were looking for him. I see your hunt was successful."

Misao clenched her right hand and gritted her teeth, but said nothing.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Sano asked irritably.

Saitoh raised an eyebrow and smirked slightly. "Idiot. My wife left me a message."

As Tokio handed her husband a cup of tea, Kenshin watched curiously as Saitoh reached out to take the cup from her hand.

(Why didn't he wait for her to put it down? That doesn't seem like Saitoh at all...) Kenshin suddenly realized that that oddly intimate act was actually just a cover for Saitoh's real gesture. With a subtle flick of the fingers, Saitoh brushed back Tokio's sleeve, exposing her wrist... and the clear band of darkening bruises around it.

His eyes narrowed ever so slightly, then glanced up at his wife. Tokio patiently returned her husband's gaze and continued to set out his dinner. Except for Kenshin, no one else seemed to notice the brief interchange between husband and wife.

(Bruises? Where did she get... oh, no... Sano.) Kenshin felt a definite twinge of uneasiness. (If Saitoh finds out that he left those bruises....) Although Saitoh had not expressed any sign of marital affection -- either by word or deed -- instinct told Kenshin that it was NOT because of any lack of feeling on Saitoh's part.

As he calmly began to devour the fish Tokio placed in front of him, Saitoh said, "Perhaps you'll be interested in knowing that Mr. Honami -- the man who decided to kill himself by smashing his brains all over the street -- was being pursued by the police. It appears that some neighbors caught him in the act of slaughtering his entire family with a sword. He was shot several times, but he still managed to elude them."

Misao whispered, "Then... you've caught the murderer... the person who's been killing all those people recently...."

"No," Saitoh calmly corrected.

"WHAT!?" everyone shouted.

"He definitely killed his own family, but he couldn't have killed the other five families. We had his whereabouts checked," Saitoh said as he casually stole the fish off Sano's plate.

Kenshin stiffened. "You mean to say...."

"Yes. "He is a murderer, but not THE murderer... if there is a single killer."

"You think there's more than one?" Kenshin said.

"There's at least two killers and perhaps more. There's a pattern in this madness. The trick is to figure out what it is."

Kenshin murmured, "All these deaths... they're totally random, but at the same time, they're not random at all."

Sano slammed his rice bowl down and said, "I don't understand what the hell you guys are trying to say!"

Saitoh snorted and said, "Of course you don't." With his chopsticks, he leisurely started putting peas in six separate heaps on the table.

"Assume that each pea is a death. There have been six distinct groupings of murders." He pointed at a single heap of peas. "Everyone within a group is related somehow -- by blood, marriage, or close friendship -- but no group is related to any other group. They have virtually nothing in common. The groups don't have mutual acquaintances and they don't have similar social, economic, or political affiliations. Do you get that much?"

Sano glared furiously at Saitoh. "Of course I do! What do you think I am? An idiot!?"

Misao muttered, "Don't answer that."

Saitoh continued, "There are only three things that all six groups have in common. First, all these people are dead. Second, they all died the same way."

Kenshin quietly said, "Killed by a highly skilled swordsman."

"Exactly."

Kenshin glanced curiously at Saitoh. "But what's the third thing?"

Saitoh carefully put a piece of bright orange carrot in each heap of peas.

"Third, there's a suicide associated with each group of deaths. Again, the suicide is related to the murder victims by blood, marriage, or friendship. Curious, isn't it?"

"'Curious' is not exactly the word I would use, Saitoh," muttered Kenshin.

"Now I get it," said Yahiko, staring at the little heaps of vegetables scattered across the tabletop. "Random in some ways, but not random in others."

Saitoh smirked at Sano. "Well, if the brat can understand what I'm talking about, surely YOU can."

"Why you...!" Sano growled as he started to get to his feet.

Megumi yanked him back down onto his cushion and snapped, "Hush! This

is getting interesting!"

As Sano and the doctor started yelling at each other, Kaoru asked, "But why are you involved? Murder, even mass murder, doesn't seem to be a matter for the secret police."

Saitoh gave them a chilly smile. "On the contrary. When expert killers suddenly show up and start slaughtering people in my jurisdiction, then I consider it my business. Even more so when I end up being a prime suspect in these murders, at least initially."

"There were traces of Shinsengumi-style swordwork," Kenshin replied.

"Hmph. I don't argue that."

There was a soft groan from the next room.

"Aoshi-sama!" Misao tried to get up, but nearly fell over because of the stiffness in her muscles.

Megumi gave Sano a last angry look and hauled herself to her feet. She patted Misao on the shoulder. "You stay put. I'll take a look at him."

Just as Megumi left the room, Tokio came from the kitchen and looked around. "Where's Megumi-san?"

Sano muttered in a sulky voice, "She's checking on Aoshi. He finally decided to wake up."

"Thank you." Tokio headed off as Misao started yelling at Sano.

Over the noise, Saitoh put a piece of red pepper on the table. "Assume that this is the killer. Or rather, the killers." He added a few more red pepper chunks.

With his own chopsticks, Kenshin replaced the carrot cube in one heap of peas with a piece of red pepper. "But we know that the unfortunate Mr. Honami is both the suicide AND the murderer associated with this group of people."

"Yes. Which makes me wonder about the other suicides...", said Saitoh. With his chopstick, he thoughtfully nudged a carrot chunk in one of the other heaps of peas.

As they all stared at the neatly arranged vegetables, Kaoru said, "But how does Misao fit into this picture?"

Saitoh shrugged. "No idea. So is someone going to tell me what happened between Shinomori and the Weasel Girl?"

Misao stopped arguing with Sano and glared angrily at Saitoh. "Will you stop calling me that!?"

Sano plunked down a chunk of onion on the tabletop, away from the other vegetables. "Say that this is Misao." He then placed a single, tiny grain of rice beside it. "And this is Aoshi...."

"What!? You jerk! How DARE you use a measly piece of rice to represent Aoshi-sama!?"

Yahiko butted into the conversation by saying, "No way! He should be a piece of cold fish!"

Misao squeaked in outrage.

As she, Yahiko, and Sano got into a heated three-way fight about the virtues and faults of Aoshi, Kenshin sighed wearily. "I think they're taking your demonstration a bit too seriously."

Saitoh uttered a malicious chuckle, then said, "So what happened? The Weasel Girl's no match for Aoshi, even if the fool was holding back."

-----

In the ward room in the clinic, Tokio glanced at Aoshi, who appeared to be sleeping peacefully again. Megumi was standing at the far side of the room. With her back turned, the doctor seemed unaware of Tokio's presence.

"Do you have any more soy sauce? You appear to be out...."

Megumi murmured, "I can't decide who should be first. That idiot Sano or Ken-san...."

Tokio cocked her head slightly and said, "Excuse me? I didn't quite catch what you said...."

Megumi turned around, black sword in hand and a wicked glint in her eyes.

-----

As Kenshin finished giving Saitoh the general overview of Misao's encounter with Aoshi -- discretely omitting any mention of the more personal moments -- Saitoh raised an eyebrow and said, "So, the Weasel Girl is blaming it all on the sword?"

"That sword's EVIL, I tell you!" Misao protested.

"What, are you going to start telling me stories of demons and ghosts, now?" Saitoh said. "Or are you suggesting that the thing's somehow cursed?"

(He... doesn't sound like he's entirely joking,) Kenshin realized with astonishment.

Misao yanked her hair and shouted, "Why am I wasting my time? You obviously don't believe a word I'm saying! That damn weapon was probably MADE for someone like you!"

"Oh ho. Now I'm curious. So, where is this diabolical sword?"

Kaoru said, "I don't know. I think Kenshin had it...."

They all turned to stare at him. Kenshin glanced around in



bewilderment, then suddenly frowned.

(Yes, I did have it... so where did I put it?) He was a little startled to realize that he couldn't quite remember where he had left the sword.

Saitoh smirked, "Going senile already, Battousai?"

"HAJIME!!!"

The next instant, Saitoh was on his feet, his sword half-drawn. Through the open double doorway leading to the main sickroom, both he and Kenshin saw Tokio hastily throwing herself over Aoshi's bed in a desperate attempt to evade the dark blade slashing toward her. Saitoh's wife rolled off the bed and landed on the floor with a thud. Scrambling to her feet, Tokio hastily backed away as Megumi jumped effortlessly over the bed and cornered her at the other side of the long ward room.

The doctor burst into a vicious snicker, then held the sword parallel to the floor. Her other hand was extended before her, hovering just above the blade, and she crouched slightly. It was an instantly recognizable stance.

A stunned Kenshin thought, (That's a form of the Gatotsu! What is Megumi doing!) He started as he heard a soft growl beside him. That faint sound, along with the narrowed eyes were the only signs of Saitoh's tightly controlled fury. But even as the former Shinsengumi captain started to move, Megumi lunged toward Tokio.

(We're not going to reach them in time!), thought Kenshin.

With no place to go, Tokio grabbed the first thing she could in a desperate attempt to shield herself. Amazingly, there was no fear or panic on her face... only grim determination. In that instant, Kenshin caught a glimpse of what must have attracted Saitoh to an apparently helpless woman like Tokio.

(A soul of steel... total dedication... two kindred spirits....)

A wolf and its mate....

Megumi's powerful thrust drove the black sword right through the metal basin in Tokio's hands. By some miracle, Tokio somehow managed to deflect the path of the blade just enough. The tip of the sword missed its main target and and ripped open the sleeve of her kimono. Tokio didn't make a sound as she clung desperately to the basin. It was the only thing which kept Megumi from cutting her to pieces.

Kenshin yelled, "Megumi! Stop!"

Amazingly, she did. She turned to stare at Saitoh and Kenshin. Saitoh inhaled sharply and Kenshin felt an eerie chill run down his spine at the look of almost unholy joy that suddenly appeared on Megumi's face. It was an expression of almost elemental recognition.

"Battousai... and Saitoh...." Megumi's smile widened even further. "Both of you... I've found you, at last!"

As Megumi attempted to wrench her blade free from the metal basin, Saitoh took instant advantage of the opening and launched his own attack.

"HIYAHHH!!!"

"SAITOH!!!" bellowed Sano as he threw himself at Saitoh. He had no real idea what was going on. All he knew was that Saitoh had every intention of killing Megumi.

Saitoh caught a glimpse of Sano's charge from the corner of his eye. With his right fist, he viciously punched Sano aside without even slowing. But that instant of distraction was more than enough for the doctor. Unable to pull her blade free in time to deflect Saitoh's attack, Megumi grabbed Tokio's sleeve and yanked the woman in front of her....

....right into the path of Saitoh's Gatotsu.

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Saitoh's only thought was, (Too close!!!)

He could see Tokio turning... trying to get out of the way... but it wouldn't be enough.

Too late to stop... and no way to miss her....

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To Kenshin, it was if time stood still... an icy winter's day....

....the pale blur that was a woman's hopelessly vulnerable back....

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....the smear of darkness that was blood....

....images he would never forget....

"NO!!!" Kenshin leapt over Sano's sprawled body and lunged with every bit of speed he had.

-----

Saitoh's desperate but futile attempt to stop was the only thing that gave Kenshin enough time to intercept him. His battou-jutsu attack slammed Saitoh's blade aside just before he crashed into his old enemy and the two of them collided with Tokio and Megumi.

With bone-jarring force, they all ended in a great heap... four people, three swords, and a perforated metal basin.

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> (end of part 5) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: More of the Dinner Show! ^\_^

Gee, I've been feeling an uncontrollable impulse to write a lemon sidestory with Saitoh and Tokio. ^\_^;;;

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THAT WHICH LINGERS: A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra

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Part 6: A Few Intimate Moments

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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of various people panting or gasping.

A weak voice said very clearly, "GET... THAT... SWORD... AWAY... FROM... HER...."

"Aoshi-sama!" Misao ran to his side as he struggled to sit up. "Don't move! You'll start bleeding again!"

He shook his head violently as he tried to stay conscious. "Misao! Do it NOW, while she's stunned!" But before she left his side, he grabbed her wrist. "Whatever you do, DON'T TOUCH IT."

The ninja girl turned pale and nodded slowly. With less than her usual agility, Misao staggered over to Megumi who was at the very bottom of the pile of bodies, with Tokio, Saitoh, and Kenshin all lying on top of her. The doctor was obviously dazed from the impact of two grown slamming her into the wall, but she was still struggling to move. Before she could free her sword, Misao hastily kicked the blade out of Megumi's weakened grasp. The weapon skidded across the floor, coming to a stop against the far wall.

Once he saw that the sword was safely out of Megumi's hands, Shinomori Aoshi quietly passed out again.

Saitoh ruthlessly heaved Kenshin off of him and slowly rose to his feet. He stared down at his wife where she lay quietly panting... and bleeding.

Kenshin's desperate move had worked... just barely. Blood seeped from a long, wicked gash that ran just above Tokio's breasts across her entire chest. But she was appeared otherwise unhurt. Kenshin had managed to deflect Saitoh's sword a few vital inches... inches that made the difference between a relatively minor cut and a fatal impalement on her husband's blade. Fortunately, his sword had also

missed Megumi by the smallest of fractions.

Saitoh knelt down beside his wife. He didn't say anything or make any move to touch her. He merely watched as she gingerly examined the long slash on her chest.

As for Kenshin, he sat numbly on the floor where Saitoh had dumped him. Still clutching his sakabatou, he bowed his head and covered his face with his free hand as he took deep, gasping breaths.

Alarmed by his reaction, Kaoru walked toward him and quietly said, "Kenshin?"

By this time, Sano had staggered back to his feet. Rubbing his throbbing jaw, he glared at Saitoh and shouted, "You bastard! You nearly killed Megumi!"

Saitoh slowly rose to his feet and turned to face the enraged Sano. As he calmly flicked Tokio's blood off his sword, Saitoh spoke with exquisite care in a frighteningly even voice.

"She tried to kill my WIFE."

"Look who's talking! YOU'RE the maniac who was about to cut down his own wife...."

Nearly everyone jumped as Kenshin's hand hit the floor with a tremendous bang.

"SANO." Kenshin's voice was low and freezing cold....

Kaoru's eyes widened. (Just like... the Battousai....)

As Sano flinched and took an involuntary step backward, Kaoru whispered, "Kenshin...?"

He took a few deep breaths, shook his head, then slowly got to his feet. In a much more normal voice, Kenshin quietly said, "Saitoh."

There was a long pause as the two men stared at each other, then Saitoh abruptly shrugged.

"Hmph." He sheathed his sword and turned his attention to his wife. Tokio was taking the opportunity to check on Megumi, who was now uttering an occasional moan.

After such a close encounter with death, one might have expected a husband to pick his wife up or at least put his arms around her. Saitoh did none of these things. He merely extended his hand to her. It was a typical Saitoh-type gesture -- arrogant and demanding -- and yet there was something both courtly and possessive about his actions.

The apparent coldness of his peremptory gesture didn't seem to bother his wife at all. Without hesitation, Tokio took her husband's hand and he effortlessly pulled her to her feet.

Releasing his grip, he pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to her. As she carefully dabbed at the still bleeding cut on her chest,

Saitoh silently walked over to one of the clinic's smaller side rooms and flung open the door. Without the slightest expression on his face, he stood by the doorway, clearly waiting for his wife to join him.

Tokio obediently headed for her husband. At the door, she turned toward the others and said, "I'm afraid Megumi-san hit her head against the wall quite hard, but I don't think she has any other serious injuries, aside from a lot of bruises. And Kaoru, you lost quite a bit of blood this morning. You really shouldn't be out of bed at all."

Finally, Tokio turned toward Kenshin and gave him a profoundly deep bow. "Thank you, Himura-san, for my life and for my husband's sake."

Kenshin returned the bow in full measure. "Thank you for taking such care of Kaoru-dono this morning," he replied simply.

Saitoh watched the entire scene impassively, without so much as a single smirk or a mocking twitch of an eyebrow.

Tokio made a graceful nod of acknowledgment, then stepped into the room. Saitoh followed his wife and silently shut the door behind him.

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Saitoh leaned back on the closed door and let out a long, drawn-out sigh. Tokio stood placidly by, still holding his bloody handkerchief.

He stared at his wife for a long moment, then a wry smile appeared on his face. "That's not an experience that I would like to repeat, Tokio."

"I'm sorry for being so clumsy," she murmured.

Saitoh reached out and gently ran his fingers just above the slash on Tokio's chest. "This will be the second scar I've given you," he said thoughtfully.

Tokio uttered a soft chuckle. "Now I have a matching set, Hajime. One in the front. One in the back."

He cradled his wife's face between his hands. His thumbs -- callused from years of wielding a sword -- gently stroked her cheekbones.

"Don't remind me. And now I owe the Battousai for saving your life," he muttered irritably.

Saitoh rested his forehead against her soft, silky hair and quietly inhaled her delicate scent. Tokio lifted her hands and delicately intertwined her fingers with his.

He looked at her hands, then at her. Demure... dainty... fragile-looking... yet this woman was strong enough to save his life on more than one occasion... strong enough to let him go his own way and still welcome him home without reservation.

His wife....

-----

After they moved the unconscious Megumi onto a bed, Kaoru shoed an anxious Sano away. He paced back and forth at the other end of the room for a few moments. Suddenly, he stopped and scowled at the closed door behind which Saitoh and his wife had gone.

He muttered, "I still can't believe it. How can a cold-blooded bastard like Saitoh possibly marry a sweet-tempered, helpless little lady like Tokio...?"

"Sweet-tempered, maybe. But helpless? No. And she's definitely not harmless," Kenshin quietly said from behind Sano's back.

Sano jumped in surprise, then turned around. "Oh... it's you."

"I wanted to apologize for yelling at you."

He grinned at Kenshin and waved his hand. "Hey, it's no big deal. You just startled me. But why did you...."

"I know you're very upset about Saitoh's attack on Megumi, but I needed to stop you before you said anything else about... THAT... particular topic." Kenshin looked away for an instant.

"Oh... you mean about him nearly killing his wife?"

Kenshin nodded. (Sano, you can't imagine how it feels....)

"Do you think he really cares about her? Tokio, I mean." Sano looked a bit skeptical about the idea.

"Yes. Probably more than you can imagine."

Sano scowled. "Well, Saitoh has a hell of a way of showing it. I mean, she nearly got killed right before his eyes and he barely said a word to her!"

"Saitoh would hardly display his innermost feelings to US. And he has no need to show Tokio that he cares. She already knows."

"You sound almost... envious."

Kenshin sounded a bit wistful. "Maybe I am. I think she understands him better than anyone else in this world. More importantly, she knows and accepts him for what he is. It's a rare gift and Saitoh knows it."

Sano thought for a minute, then said, "But what do you mean about her not being helpless or harmless?"

Kenshin smiled faintly. "Sano, do you really think that someone like Saitoh would ever consider marrying an ordinary woman? Tokio may not be trained in physical combat, but she has intelligence and a will that matches his in every way. Saitoh Tokio is a kind, sweet-tempered lady... but in matters regarding her husband, never underestimate her."

Staring at some distant point, Kenshin quietly said, "If Saitoh is the Mibu's Wolf, then Tokio is the she-wolf...." He glanced at Sano. "And she has teeth, even if she doesn't choose to show them."

"Uh... aren't you exaggerating a bit, Kenshin?"

"I don't think so."

Kenshin's gaze drifted over to Kaoru as she kept an eye on Megumi. He thought of the many things he hadn't told her... memories and secrets of a bloody past. Would she be able to truly accept him for what he was and who he had been? But even as his thoughts turned to Kaoru, something nagged at him. He had forgotten something important... but what?

-----

After Saitoh helped Tokio bandage her injuries, he leaned against the wall and watched her make a few repairs to her torn kimono. As she stitched, Tokio murmured, "Do you think that sword is really cursed?"

"If you had asked me that during the Bakumatsu no Doran, I would have laughed in your face. But after what happened to the two of us at the Wolf Shrine...." Saitoh gave his wife a sour look. "I think I'll defer judgment for the moment."

As he absently rubbed the scarred patch on his left shoulder, his thoughts drifted back to a certain night over seven years ago and the inexplicable events that occurred in a lonely mountain shrine. He knew from painful first-hand experience that such things as curses indeed existed.

(But is a curse involved in all these murders and today's events? That remains to be seen.... Is there a more mundane explanation for all these bizarre occurrences?)

But he couldn't forget the eerie flash of recognition in Megumi's eyes when she had caught a glimpse of both him and Himura. And then there were those last few ominous words....

'Both of you... I've found you, at last!'

-----

As Kaoru attended to Megumi, Misao kept a careful eye on the still unconscious Aoshi. She hoped that he would wake up again, but she also dreaded that moment.

(What could I say? I nearly killed him. I accused him of unforgivable things. He should hate me... but... but he said he cared about me....)

"Aoshi-... Aoshi-sama....," she whispered.

He slowly opened his eyes. There was a faint twitch at the corner of his mouth that seemed to hint at a smile. "Misao."

"I... I... so... sorry.... The things... the things I said...." Tears blurred her vision as she struggled to find the right words to express herself.

"Misao...." Aoshi quietly repeated. He too was searching for the right words to comfort the girl sitting beside him. There were things that both of them desperately wanted to say, but with five other people in the room, the situation could hardly be considered private. As Aoshi groped for something to say, he glanced away from Misao... then stiffened in alarm.

Without warning, he pulled himself upright, ignoring the tearing pain in his side. Shoving Misao aside, he grabbed the pitcher from the bedside table and hurtled it.

The pitcher hit Yahiko on the shoulder and sent the boy sprawling on the floor... away from the black sword lying so innocently on the floor.

The sound of smashing pottery grabbed everyone's attention. In an instant, Kenshin was kneeling beside a stunned Yahiko. He gave Aoshi a hard look and said, "What's going on?"

"DON'T TOUCH THAT SWORD!" panted Aoshi as he collapsed back onto the bed, clutching at his side. Misao was horrified to see fresh blood start to seep through the bandages on Aoshi's side.

"Aoshi-sama! Kaoru, help me!"

In the meantime, Yahiko was rubbing his aching shoulder and muttering, "What the hell's going on? Ouch!"

Kenshin worriedly asked, "Are you all right?" as he helped Yahiko sit up.

The boy grimaced and muttered, "Yeah... but what did he do that for?"

"He was trying to stop you from picking that sword up." Kenshin glanced back at the weapon only to see Kaoru reaching down to pick it up.

"No! Kaoru-dono! STOP!"

She seemed oblivious to Kenshin's frantic warning and continued reaching for the sword's hilt. He did the only thing he could. Kenshin threw himself across the floor and snatched the blade out right out from under her grasping fingers.

Kaoru suddenly blinked as her hand closed on empty air.

Everyone froze as Kenshin rolled gracefully to his feet, black sword in hand.

He looked down at the dark weapon he was now holding and gave it a superficial examination. Kenshin then glanced up to see everyone staring at him with anxious and slightly horrified expressions on their faces.



"You picked up that... that THING!" Misao exclaimed, shuddering slightly.

Kenshin quietly said, "I had to. Kaoru-dono was about to touch it...."

"Yeah, but now YOU'RE touching it!" Sano shouted.

"And you... you don't sense anything... wrong with it?" said Aoshi in a very weak voice.

They all twitched nervously as Kenshin shook his head and propped the weapon against his shoulder. "No. As far as I can tell, it's a superbly made sword with a unusual matte black finish on the blade. And that's about it."

"And you're not feeling any urge to start attacking people?" Misao asked suspiciously.

Kenshin said very empathically, "No! Of course not!"

Kaoru stared at her hand in bewilderment. (I don't understand. For a moment there... that sword seemed to be the most beautiful thing in the world... I just couldn't stop myself from picking it up....) Her vision started to go dark and she started to sway.

"Kaoru-dono!" Kenshin dropped the black sword and grabbed her before she could topple to the floor.

With Misao fully occupied with getting Aoshi's bleeding under control and with Kenshin tending to a semi-conscious Kaoru, no one noticed that Yahiko and Sano seemed irresistibly drawn to the weapon lying in the floor.

They both grabbed for the sword, just as the door to the side room abruptly slid open. In their haste to get a hold of the blade, neither Sano nor Yahiko was paying attention to what the other guy was doing. They collided abruptly with a loud thud. As Sano and Yahiko landed on the floor clutching their skulls, Saitoh whisked the weapon away from right under their noses.

"Saitoh!" protested Kenshin and several other people.

"I'm out of sight for a few minutes and look what happens. Breaking pottery... hysterical females... bleeding bodies.... I'm feeling left out of all the fun."

Kenshin noted that Saitoh sounded quite like his normal sarcastic, irritating self again.

While everyone nervously watched him for any suspicious or unusual behavior, Saitoh held up the weapon and took a careful look at it. "So this is the evil sword that's supposedly causing all the problems. Hmph."

Tokio quietly moved over to Aoshi's side, freeing Misao to confront Saitoh.

"Don't tell me that you can't sense anything strange about that sword either!" the ninja girl shouted.

Saitoh murmured, "Either?"

Still holding a barely conscious Kaoru in his arms, Kenshin gave Saitoh a harried look and said, "Whatever's wrong with that blade, it doesn't seem to be affecting me."

"Ow, my head!" groaned Sano.

"Why don't you watch where you're going, you jerk!" yelled Yahiko.

"Me!? You're the one who got in my way!"

"I was going to pick it up first."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!"

With a casual sweep of his free hand, Saitoh smacked both Sano and Yahiko in the head and said, "Shut up."

Sano jumped to his feet. "You can't tell me to shut up!"

United by a common enemy, Yahiko said, "Yeah, give it to him, Sano!"

The ninja girl glared at Kenshin and Saitoh. "I can't believe that both of you can't detect anything weird about that damn blade!" Misao then turned angrily toward Sano and Yahiko. "And I can't believe that both you idiots are arguing about who's getting first dibs on a cursed sword!"

Sano blinked and muttered, "Now that you mention it...."

"....why was I trying so hard to pick that stupid sword up?" Yahiko mumbled in bewilderment.

As Kenshin carried Kaoru to the last unoccupied bed in the room, he said apologetically, "Sorry, Misao, but I really can't sense anything strange about that sword."

Saitoh snorted and said, "If it wasn't for the Fox-woman's recent bout of homicidal behavior, I'd say that you were imagining things, girl."

Misao snapped, "Well, if you're so sure about that sword being harmless, why don't you just hand it over to your wife and let her play with it?"

Kenshin winced and muttered, "Misao...."

Saitoh turned and gave the ninja girl a long, silent stare. She clapped her hands over her mouth and instinctively retreated toward Aoshi's comforting presence.

(Oops. I think that was the wrong thing to say....)

At that moment, there was a brilliant flash of lightning, followed

almost immediately by a tremendous crack of thunder. A cold wind howled through the clinic, sending papers and loose items flying. A few seconds later, the storm began.

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> (end of part 6) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: Things start to get creepy. ^\_^

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THAT WHICH LINGERS: A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra

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Part 7: Times Gone By

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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

The pouring rain came down in torrents and the howling wind seemed to scrape the skin raw. As Saitoh stared outside, Kenshin walked up beside him and said, "It doesn't look like you're going anywhere tonight... not in that storm."

Saitoh flicked a quick glance at his wife before he slammed the front door shut. The black sword still in hand, he walked over to Aoshi's bed and stared down on the injured man.

"So Shinomori, it seems that you know some important things about this sword. Why don't you tell me how you happened to get that information?"

Tokio had successfully managed to get the former Okashira's bleeding under control, but the extra blood loss left him hovering on the edge of consciousness. Aoshi dazedly replied, "Han...", before he realized what he was about to blurt out in front of everyone. He abruptly fell silent.

Misao stared at him. (Was... was he about to say... Hannya!?) Her mind flashed back to that moment in Kyoto, when she had been lying nearly unconscious on the roof of the Aoiya. (Hannya told me that Kenshin had succeeded... that Aoshi-sama was coming back to me....)

Saitoh raised an eyebrow and said, "Yes? You were saying?"

Aoshi sighed and said in a weary voice, "I don't really know anything about that sword."

"Then why all the warnings to not touch it, hm?"

"When Misao attacked me, her behavior was so... extreme...."

She turned white at the memory. The horrible things she had said... the pain and bewilderment on his face....

Aoshi continued, "There had to be something wrong. I made a wild guess that the strange sword she had was somehow responsible... so I gambled and took it away from her."

Sano muttered, "Pretty serious gamble if you were willing to break her arm over it."

Aoshi quietly said, "I didn't have time for gentler methods. But it seemed to work. She started to act normally almost immediately after she dropped the sword. I think one could reasonably assume that the weapon was the cause of her... unusual behavior."

It was clear that there was a lot more going on, but it was equally clear that Aoshi wasn't about to discuss the subject any further. Saitoh debated pressuring Aoshi for answers, but Kenshin and others were bound to object strenuously. He wasn't in the mood for a pitched battle... at the moment.

They all tensely waited for Saitoh's reaction to Aoshi's blatantly vague reply. To their surprise, Saitoh shrugged, but they all knew that he would never give up so easily. Saitoh Hajime would be back for more answers.

In the meantime, Saitoh glanced at his wife and said, "You're the collector of old stories and legends."

His wife bowed her head respectfully. "There are many legends about cursed weapons. In some stories, the curses are subtle and take generations to manifest. But in other tales, evil spirits are said to take up residence in certain weapons and drive men to instant murder. It is improbable, but the sheer number of stories would indicate that such things could happen."

"Hmph."

Sano yelled, "Is that all you can say? So what are we going to do about it?"

"Nothing at the moment."

"What do you mean 'nothing'!? Shouldn't we get rid of it?"

"And how do you propose to do that, you idiot? Leave it out in the street for some fool like yourself to pick it up?"

"Whaddya mean by that!?" shouted an outraged Sano.

Saitoh smirked evilly. "There was certainly enough evidence to suggest that there's something abnormal with this sword, but that didn't stop you or the brat from fighting over it, hm?"

From her bed, Kaoru said quietly, "He's right. There's just something about that sword that makes you want to pick it up."

Yahiko muttered, "Maybe we could... bury it?"

"Once there was a man who threw a cursed sword into the sea. A few minutes later, a great shark surged out of the waves and landed on the deck of his ship at his feet. Piercing the shark's body was the very same sword which had been so recently cast away," Tokio recited in a gentle voice as she started to pick up the remains of their long neglected dinner.

Saitoh apparently ignored his wife's comments and said, "This sword is an important piece of evidence in several murders...", he glanced at Misao and the still unconscious Megumi, "and attempted murders. I'm not about to drop it into a hole and leave it for any stray dog to dig up and steal."

Kenshin thought, (Saitoh's not scoffing at the idea of a cursed sword. Tokio says that it's quite possible that there really is something 'wrong' about that weapon. He definitely respects her opinion, even on such a strange matter. That's understandable. So would I.)

Aloud, Kenshin said, "Since we can't get rid of it at the moment, what do you suggest we do with it?"

Saitoh casually tossed it in Kenshin's direction. "Try not to misplace it THIS time."

"Oh, so you're dumping that thing on Kenshin, now? What, are you scared of it?" taunted Sano.

"I'm not the one frightened of it."

"Are you saying that I'm chicken!?"

"Roosterhead."

"ARGHHHH...!"

Kenshin hastily grabbed a hold of Sano's jacket and said, "Sano, please calm down! At the moment, there's only two people who seem to be able to handle this sword without being overcome by murderous impulses. It's either me or Saitoh. Take your pick."

"Sheesh... since you put it that way...."

Tokio approached Kenshin with a blanket in her hands. "Since the scabbard is missing, you can use this to wrap the sword."

"Thank you, Tokio-dono."

She smiled at him and said, "Everyone really needs some rest, especially Misao, Shinomori-san, and Kaoru."

Yahiko yawned conspicuously, "Gee, I feel exhausted!"

Sano muttered, "How can you feel exhausted!? You didn't DO anything!"

"Whaddya mean I didn't do anything? I was helping Megumi all afternoon!"

Tokio murmured, "He was a great help. The child that was in here earlier wasn't as badly injured as Megumi first thought. We were actually able to send him home."

Yahiko yawned again. "Yeah, otherwise we would've had the entire family hovering around here like a swarm of angry bees!"

-----  
Everyone eventually found a place to spend the night. Aoshi, Megumi, and Kaoru occupied the beds in the clinic's wardroom, while Kenshin and Sano ended up on the wardroom floor. Tokio shared Dr. Genzai's room with Yahiko. There wasn't any place in the wardroom for Misao, so Tokio gently coaxed the ninja girl into taking Megumi's room.

As for Saitoh, he prowled around the now silent clinic for a few minutes. Passing the wardroom door, he saw Kenshin sitting against the wall, his sakabatou in its familiar place against his shoulder and the black sword -- carefully and thoroughly wrapped in a blanket -- lying on the floor right beside him.

They looked at each other for a long moment, then Saitoh walked away. He took up a carefully selected position in the clinic's main room, and settled down for the night. Like Kenshin, he had no plans of sleeping.

So much for good intentions....

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Megumi found herself wandering through dark, unfamiliar streets.

(What am I doing out here in the middle of the middle of the night?  
And where am I?)

A faint shuffling noise came from nearby. She looked around frantically, but the street was still deserted.

The shuffling sound got louder... came closer.

"Who's out there!?"

There was no answer, but she saw something move. She backed away, her heart starting to race.

The shuffling continued to approached... and then she heard the hoarse breathing. The stench of decay and corruption clogged her lungs.

Then she saw it... a patch of murky shadow that seemed to swell and grow as it headed in her direction.

Megumi spun around and ran for her life.

-----

(What the...!?)

Misao stared around her in astonishment. She knew these streets. She had played in them since she was a child.

But what was she doing back in Kyoto... and at night?

She sensed a sudden presence behind her. Misao turned and jumped away just as something large and dark sprang from the shadows and struck the spot where she had been standing.

It looked like a huge paw... but not from any beast she had ever seen.

She retreated as she grabbed for her kunai. Her attacker followed. She couldn't see who -- or what -- it could be, but she could easily sense the malevolence that hovered around its shadowy form.

/ You were mine once... you shall be again.... /

"You wish! KAN SATSU TOBI KUNAI!!!"

The blades pierced the darkness... and were swallowed without a sound.

/ All mine, pretty little hellcat.... /

The hunger in the eerie voice made her knees shake. Then she felt something... tugging at her... somehow trying to suck her into the shadowy mass that shambling after her.

Misao did the only thing she could.

She ran for the Aoiya.

-----

Sano abruptly sat up when he heard a woman's terrified screams.

"Jo-chan!!!"

He jumped to his feet, but was stunned to realized that he was no longer in Dr. Genzai's clinic. Instead, he was standing on a deserted street that he had never seen before.

It was nighttime. The moon was up, but instead being the usual pale silver, the moonlight seemed to contain an unhealthy reddish hue.

(As if it's tainted by.... blood.)

Another piercing scream echoed in the night, but no one appeared to notice. The neighboring buildings stayed quiet... their windows remained dark.

As he ran in the direction of scream, he could hear a woman begging and pleading.

"Please don't kill me! I had to do it! They threatened to destroy my family if I didn't!"

An appalling familiar voice coldly said, "You lie. You spied and betrayed us for money alone."

"No! That's not true! I was paid, but... but the money was not for me. It was for my brother!"

"To pay gambling debts and his drug supplier," the icy male voice stated.

"I have some of the money left! Take it! You can have whatever you want!" Her voice turned coaxing and seductive, "I'll do anything for you. Just let me liv.....agggGHHHH!" Her voice abruptly choked off into a muffled scream.

Suddenly, a few houses away from Sano, a door slid open and a man walked out. Pausing briefly to flick the blood from his sword, Saitoh Hajime stepped into the street. But it was a Saitoh that Sano had never seen before... a man with long, flowing hair held back by a headband and a high set ponytail... a man dressed in a blood-flecked light blue jacket whose sleeves were edged with a pattern of white triangles.

"Saitoh!!!"

But the captain of the third unit of the Shinsengumi didn't answer. His gaze seemed to skim over Sano as if he wasn't even there. Saitoh then turned and walked away, a cold smile of satisfaction on his face.

Sano ran over to the house and looked inside. He stared in shock. In the blood-splattered hallway was the body of a dead woman. She lay just inside the doorway with her guts spilling from her slashed belly.

"Saitoh, you murdering bastard! You're not getting away THAT easily!"

Sano didn't know what the hell was going on, but he was going to find out from Saitoh... one way or another.

-----  
Shinomori Aoshi stood in the middle of a street which was both familiar, yet eerily different. He wasn't certain how it was different, but something was definitely wrong.

How could he be standing in a place that was at least a five days' travel away?

How could he be standing in a darkened street of Kyoto?

Even as he struggled with those questions, he heard the sound of running footsteps. He turned just as a woman with long black hair bumped into him hard.

He grabbed her shoulders and pushed her away, then stared in



astonishment.

"Takani Megumi!?"

The doctor had been staring over her shoulder, a frightened look on her face. But when she heard her name and turned to see who was talking to her, her expression became even more terrified.

She wrenched herself free of his grasp and staggered back a few steps.

"Shinomori... Aoshi.... No... it can't be!" With those words, she dashed toward his left and tried to run past him. He reached out to stop her but mysteriously, she eluded his grasp. Even as he watched, she bolted down the street and abruptly disappeared into the shadows.

He ran after her, but she was gone without a trace.

"What's going on!" he muttered to himself. Suddenly, a man shouted nearby. The sound was swiftly followed by several screams and groans, then some thumping noises.

Aoshi emerged from the alleyway to a scene of carnage. Even as he watched, there was a single flash of silver... the unmistakable sound of steel slicing flesh... then two men crumpled to the ground. They joined six other men who lay in great pools of gore. The lone swordsman left standing wiped the blood from his blade, then let the stained sheets of paper flutter away in the frail night breeze... then he turned.

But even without looking at his face, Aoshi already knew the identity of the swordsman. Even the pale moonlight could not wash out the telltale redness of the long hair, bound up in a high ponytail and flowing around his face like the mane of a great hunting beast.

Staring into the cold golden eyes that gleamed with a nearly primal fire, Shinomori Aoshi finally confronted the man he had hoped to challenge for the title of 'Strongest'... and felt the faintest twinge of dread.

The master killer of Kyoto....

"Hitokiri Battousai."

The name came out as the faintest of whispers, so quiet that it was drowned out by the sighing of the wind.

The Battousai suddenly froze, then turned to look down the street.

...then Aoshi's heart nearly stopped as he saw Misao running toward the red-haired swordsman, frantically shouting, "Himura! Himura!"

(No, Misao! NO!!!)

The Battousai took a two-handed grip on his katana and started to move in her direction.

Aoshi grabbed for his kodachi but his hands came up empty. He was unarmed.

Misao stumbled to a halt and gave the Battousai a bewildered look when he didn't respond to her cries.

"Himura...?" she whispered, even as the Hitokiri's pace accelerated and his sword -- definitely no sakabatou -- prepared to strike.

Aoshi erupted from the alley into the street and skidded to a halt in front of a startled Misao.

"Aoshi-sama!?"

He took a defensive stance and prepared to meet the Hitokiri Battousai with his bare hands. His only hope was to delay the Battousai long enough to give Misao to get a good headstart.

"Run, Misao!"

She was now only realizing this was not Himura Kenshin charging toward her. This was the TRUE Hitokiri Battousai... and he made the person who had taken out Cho of the Jupon Gatana with a single sword stroke seem like the palest of imitations.

"No! No, I won't!"

There was no time to argue. The Hitokiri was upon them.

Aoshi prepared himself -- futilely perhaps -- as the Battousai and his blade plunged toward him....

"AOSHI-SAMA!!!"

....and went right through him.

A stunned Aoshi stood, completely untouched and unharmed. He stared blankly at his body. There were no pain... no blood. It was as if the Battousai hadn't even been there.

"Uhhhh...."

"Misao...!" Aoshi spun around just in time to see her collapse on her knees, stupefied by both shock and relief. He grabbed her shoulders and frantically looked her over. She appeared completely uninjured, just like him.

He glanced over her shoulder and froze at the battle raging just a few yards away. She turned to look, also, and saw the Battousai fiercely battling his way through a group of uniformed swordsmen wearing headbands and pale blue jackets.

Aoshi softly whispered, "Shinsengumi...."

Misao clutched at his shoulders even as she stared at the fighting going on in front of her. Himura... no, the Battousai methodically cut down every single one of his opponents with a bone-chilling combination of efficiency and grace, the likes of which she had never

seen before.

All his opponents dead or dying, the Hitokiri Battousai flicked the blood off his katana, and sheathed it as he disappeared into the darkness.

Misao huddled against Aoshi's body for comfort as she whispered, "I... I don't understand.... What's going on!?"

Aoshi had finally put it all together when he had seen the Shinsengumi.

"Misao, we're not here."

"Wha...?"

"We're not really here. This isn't real."

"Are... are you saying that... this is a... this is all a dream!?"

"Yes, I think so."

-----

Kaoru stirred restlessly, then finally opened her eyes. She sat up carefully and looked around Dr. Genzai's clinic. Aoshi was sleeping in the bed to her right and Megumi was lying on the bed to her left.

(What... what woke me up?)

There was something nagging at her. A thought... a feeling.... She wasn't sure exactly what it was, but it had something to do with....

"Kenshin."

She got out of bed and slowly walked over to him as he sat against the wall, his head bowed. As she approached, Kenshin didn't move at all.

(Is he really asleep?)

She reached out to touch his shoulder when her eyes focused on the blanket-wrapped bundle lying on the floor beside him. She stared blankly at it for a minute, then slowly reached down.

A door quietly slid open.

"Kaoru? What are you doing out of bed?" said Tokio.

Kaoru stood up suddenly, then nearly passed out from the painful twinge in her stomach. Tokio quickly grabbed her around the waist and helped her back to bed.

"Is there something you needed?"

"I just... Kenshin....," Kaoru muttered.

"Do you want me to get him for you?"

"Oh no. It's... nothing."

"All right. Just lie down and close your eyes."

As Tokio gently stroked her forehead, Kaoru drifted into a peaceful sleep.

When she was certain Kaoru was unconscious, Tokio walked over to her husband. Like Kenshin, he seemed to be so deeply asleep that he didn't react to her approach.

Tokio knelt beside her husband and put her fingers on his neck. His pulse was strong and steady, but he still didn't wake up. She got back to her feet and gave him a long, thoughtful look before returning to her own bed.

-----

Aoshi and Misao stood together on a bloodstained, corpse-filled Kyoto street that wasn't really there.

"If this is a dream, then... what are we both doing here? Why would either of us be dreaming of Himura? I've got much better things to dream about...." Misao blushed furiously.

Aoshi looked at her. He wasn't actually smiling, but there was a faint curve to his lips that hinted that he might. However, his voice remained quite serious.

"I don't know. Maybe this isn't a dream. Maybe... it's a memory."

"Uh.... Aoshi-sama?"

"Yes?"

She suddenly threw her arms around a startled Aoshi and sobbed, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry I said all those horrible things to you and I'm sorry I hurt you and I don't know why I did it and please forgive me and you probably now hate me and...."

Aoshi was ruefully grateful that in this dream at least, he wasn't injured... otherwise, her fierce hug would have really hurt. He gently put his hand over Misao's mouth to silence the flood of incoherent apologies, then gently held her shoulders.

"Yes, those things you said to me hurt... much more than any of the physical injuries you inflicted." He felt her flinch and he gripped her a bit tighter. "But your words hurt because they were mostly true."

"No!"

"It's only fair that you should be angry with me for what I've done... what I've put you and the others through. You're quite correct. I was a selfish, traitorous coward in the past. And now... I'm still selfish and still a coward."

Misao mutely shook her head in denial.

Perhaps the certainty that this was all a dream gave Aoshi the courage to say things he never would have said while awake.

"So much of what I've done... so much of what I have NOT done... it's all because of fear and pride." He looked away. "I envy your strength, Misao."

She stared up at him in confusion.

"You're brave enough to wear your heart in plain view and you don't care if you appear foolish when you do so."

"Aoshi-sama...."

"You and Himura...." He felt her shiver and quickly shook his head. "Not the Hitokiri Himura Battousai... I'm talking about Himura Kenshin. You've both shown me that it's not the strength in my sword arm or body that's the most important. No, it's the strength of the mind and the heart."

He uttered a soft, bitter laugh. "You two have taught me this so clearly... and yet, I find that I can't follow your example. I don't have the courage... maybe I don't have the ability to so."

Tears started to flow from Misao's eyes as she said, "Don't say that! You have as much heart and feeling as anyone! The Oniwabanshuu don't just respect you... they love you! And Hannya and the others... why do you think they were willing to die to protect you? They won't do that if they couldn't sense how much you cared about them in return!"

Aoshi opened his mouth to protest, but Misao quickly added, "You might have wandered into darkness for a while -- just like Himura Kenshin did -- but that doesn't mean that you've lost the right to be happy! Everyone deserves a second chance!"

She sniffled and wiped at her nose.

"The most important lesson I learned from Kenshin, Kaoru, and the others is to... to trust in the people who care about you! You've hidden away your laughter, your smiles, your feelings for so long. If you can find these things and set them free yourself, that's fine. But if you can't, then let someone help you! Let ME help you..., " she finished in a soft whisper.

And even as the street around them started to fade into mist, Aoshi stared into Misao's bright blue eyes and thought that maybe... just maybe... she was right.

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Kenshin awoken with a start, then glanced around. Everyone still seemed to be asleep. He rubbed his eyes blearily, dutifully picked up the bundle containing the black sword, and trudged off to get some cold water.

Still half-asleep, he managed to wash his face and tidy himself up by

sheer force of habit.

(When we get back to the dojo, I need to take a quick bath.)

-----

Sano woke up as someone prodded him ungently in the ribs. He rolled over and found Saitoh staring down at him with his usual infuriating smirk.

Sano leapt to his feet and grabbed Saitoh by the collar.

"You bloodthirsty bastard! How could you kill that woman!?"

Saitoh's only response was to slam his fist into Sano's stomach. As the young man crumpled to the floor gasping for air, the policeman gave him an irritated look.

"Wake up, you dumbass."

Sano sat there on the floor a moment as he tried to sort things out. "Huh. Must have been a dream...."

"Idiot."

Sano scrambled to his feet and glared accusingly at Saitoh. "Oh, since you're not satisfied with making every one of my waking hours hell, now you have to invade my sleep, too!"

"If it wasn't for the fact that my wife was the one who cooked dinner, I'd say that your brain's rotted from food poisoning.... what little brains you have, that is."

"Why you....!"

Saitoh glanced away, uninterested in Sano's little temper tantrum. The former Shinsengumi abruptly stiffened as he caught sight of Kenshin coming through the clinic's back door. Saitoh's hand went reflexively to his sword.

"Saitoh?" Kenshin said in a startled voice.

The only response he got from Saitoh was a long, searching stare. Sano gave the policeman an angry, but befuddled look, then he glanced at Kenshin himself and gaped in surprise.

Sano had never seen Kenshin wear his hair up like that before. Instead of being tied back at the nape of the neck as usual, his long red hair was pulled up in a high ponytail which somehow gave a surprisingly fierce edge to Kenshin's appearance.

"Hey, Kenshin!"

"Yes, Sano?" he absently replied.

"Why do you have your hair like that!?"

"Like what?" Kenshin looked even more confused than before.

"Like that!" Sano made a wild pointing gesture.

Kaoru entered the room, assisted by Tokio and exclaimed, "What did you do to your hair?"

"Kaoru-dono?" Kenshin nervously patted his head, but as soon as his fingers encountered the ponytail, he froze. Both Kaoru and Sano watched in both confusion and worry as a tense, dismayed expression appeared on Kenshin's face.

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> (end of part 7) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: The creepiness continues! ^\_^

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THAT WHICH LINGERS: A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra

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Part 8: The Past Revisited

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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

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Kaoru smiled slightly and said, "I've never seen you with your hair up in a ponytail like that.... You know, it really suits you, Kenshin."

The pale, tense look that came over his face made her wonder, (What's wrong? Why does he look so unhappy?)

Kaoru took a step in Kenshin's direction, but her knees abruptly buckled. In a flash, Kenshin scooped her up and put her back in bed. As Tokio felt Kaoru's forehead and checked her pulse, Kenshin said, "Tokio-dono. What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure. She seems to be getting a bit feverish. I need to check her wound and make sure it hasn't gotten infected."

Sano said, "By the way, how's Megumi doing? Shouldn't she be awake by now?"

"She did regain consciousness sometime during the night, but she was badly confused. I've been waking her up at regular intervals to make she hasn't lapsed into a coma. Yahiko?"

The boy stumbled in and sleepily muttered, "What?"

"I think Kaoru should stay here at the clinic for a little while longer. Could you go back to her house and get her a change of clothes?"

"Oh... sure thing."

Tokio smiled and said, "Thank you. And I'll have breakfast ready when you get back."

Sano got up and drawled, "Come on."

"Just where do you think you're going?" complained Yahiko.

"It was a pretty nasty storm last night. I want to see how the dojo's doing. And I can't stand being around HIM," Sano jabbed his thumb in Saitoh's direction, "any more."

Slinging his shinai over his shoulder, Yahiko muttered, "Fine." Turning to Tokio, he said, "We'll be right back!"

After Sano and Yahiko left, Kenshin turned his attention back to Kaoru.

"She's feverish? How bad is it?"

"It's just a mild fever at the moment. Hopefully it won't get any worse...."

At that moment, Misao burst into the room.

"Aoshi-sama... eek!" Her throat suddenly went very, very dry as both Saitoh and Kenshin whirled around toward her and went for their swords. For an instant, the two men stared at her with narrowed, wary eyes,... then they both suddenly relaxed.

Saitoh snorted quietly as he slid his half-drawn sword back into its sheath. Kenshin hadn't drawn his sakabatou, but his hand had been firmly gripping the hilt.

(Why did I...?)

"Kenshin? What's wrong?" whispered a badly worried Kaoru.

Misao could barely keep her knees from shaking. Facing an apparently hostile Saitoh Hajime was bad enough, but facing him AND Kenshin was almost more than she could take at the moment.

When Kenshin turned to respond to Kaoru's question, Misao got the first good at his hair. With a squeak, she blurted out, "Your hair! Why are you wearing it up like that!?"

"Like what?" Kenshin said in a distracted voice as he fretted over Kaoru's pale, drawn appearance.

"Like the way you wore it when you were the Hitokiri Battousai... eep!" Misao suddenly clamped her mouth shut.

As Kenshin stiffened, Kaoru's eyes widened. (Is that it? Is that why



he was so unhappy when I said that wearing his hair this way suited him? Oh, Kenshin... I'm sorry!)

He glanced curiously at Misao. "How did you know that? How did you know how I wore my hair in Kyoto all those years ago?"

"I... I...", stuttered Misao. (I can't tell him that I saw it in a dream!)

"Hmph. It really brings back memories. Doesn't it,... Battousai?" Saitoh gave Kenshin a distinctly malicious grin.

"Saitoh...." Kenshin glared back at his old enemy.

The ninja girl hastily said, "Uh, guys. What's wrong with Kaoru? She's not looking too good."

"Well, thank YOU, Misao," snapped a peeved Kaoru.

Tokio said, "It's possible that her wound's gotten slightly infected.... That black sword could have been contaminated by dirt...."

"Or it could be poisoned," Saitoh murmured with almost ghoulish relish.

"WHAT!?" screamed Misao.

"Oh dear....," Tokio murmured.

"Saitoh!" Kenshin gritted his teeth and watched the ninja girl with considerable misgivings.

"Poisoned!? Then... then...." Misao gave Kaoru a horrified stare. "That... that...."

"Misao, we don't KNOW the blade's poisoned...." Tokio gave her husband a mildly reproachful look. He shrugged nonchalantly in return.

The ninja girl was too upset to pay any attention whatsoever to Tokio's reassurances. She glanced wildly around the room, then her gaze zeroed in on the still figure of Shinomori Aoshi.

"That means.... WAHHHH!!!" Misao burst into tears and flung herself over Aoshi's bed.

"No!!! Please don't die! After all we've been through, you can't die now...! I want to hear your laughter...!"

Aoshi slowly awoke from a very deep sleep only to find Misao laying on top of him and weeping hysterically.

In a soft, but perfectly clear voice, he said, "Misao,... you're getting my bandages wet."

-----

It was only a short walk from Dr. Genzai's clinic and the Kamiya Dojo. On their way back, Sano muttered, "Jo-chan's going to throw a

fit when she sees all the damage that storm last night caused."

"I hope you realize just who's going to be fixing all those holes and stuff!" snapped Yahiko.

"Oh, don't remind me."

There was a brief period of depressed silence as they both thought about all the work Kaoru was sure to dump on them.

"Hey, Sano."

"Yeah."

"Tokio-san is some lady, huh? With both Megumi and Kaoru pretty much out of commission...."

"I know. But when you think about it, it makes sense. Saitoh doesn't make allowances for anyone. There's no way he'd marry a woman that needs to be coddled. Heh. Talk about strong females."

"But she's so sweet and nice about it, you really can't tell her no when she asks you to do something."

"Kinda scary, isn't it? But I know what you mean."

They turned the corner and stopped dead. Sano looked around him in bewilderment.

Yahiko muttered, "Uh... where did all these houses come from?"

The scene in front of them was completely unfamiliar. Instead of the familiar stone-walled compounds, the street was lined with tall wooden buildings. They turned and ran back around the corner, only to see more wooden houses.

"What the hell!?"

The street was deserted and gloomy. The sky was filled with dark roiling clouds which foretold the coming of another storm.

"Where are we!?" shouted Yahiko.

"I don't KNOW! So why are you yelling at me!?" snarled an increasingly irritated and uneasy Sano.

"Because there's no one else to yell at! You've managed to get us lost somehow!"

"Whoa! There's no way you can blame this on me! I...."

Both Sano and Yahiko caught a flicker of movement down the street. They both turned just in time to see the briefest glimpse of long red hair -- a very familiar shade of red hair -- swirling in the breeze before disappearing into a side alley.

"Duh?"

"What is Kenshin doing wandering around here? I would've thought he'd be sticking close to Kaoru since she was feeling so bad..., " muttered

Sano.

"And why is he still wearing his hair up like that?" added Yahiko.

They stared at each other, then charged off after Kenshin. Considering how fast their friend could move, it wasn't surprising that they nearly lost him several times amid the narrow streets and alleys.

Sano abruptly grabbed Yahiko and pulled the boy to a grinding halt just as he was about to burst out of the alleyway into a fair-sized street.

"Wha...?"

Sano clamped his hand over Yahiko's mouth and uttered a soft, but emphatic, "Shhhh!" They stood in the shadows of the alley listening to the conversation in the street.

A weak, tired man's voice said, "Himura-san!" He sounded greatly relieved.

"I'll take care of it. Get moving."

Yahiko barely managed to smother a gasp. It was Kenshin speaking,...and yet it wasn't. The voice was familiar, yet unspeakably different. There were no old-fashioned formalities... no polite 'if you please' phrases.... His speech was cold, precise, and left no room for argument. He had heard that voice before... during Saitoh's and Kenshin's battle in the dojo.

The voice of the Hitokiri Battousai....

The boy gave Sano a shocked and frightened look. It was clear from Sano's expression that he recognized exactly who was speaking. The two of them peered out of the alleyway and watched Kenshin, dressed in a dark blue jacket and hakama, confront a group of swordsmen. It was clear from their anxious expressions that they knew how dangerous their opponent was, even if they didn't know his name. They drew their swords as their leader shouted, "Stand aside!"

Yahiko turned white as a sheet, then bolted into the road before Sano could stop him. There was an instant of stillness, then the scene erupted into deadly motion as Kenshin... no, the Battousai charged.

The gloomy street was now filled with flashes of red... the red of the Battousai's hair, the high ponytail lashing through the air like the tail of a hunting cat... the red of blood flung from steel and pouring forth from gaping wounds....

And then there was only two men left standing... the Battousai and the leader of the obliterated squad of swordsmen. The squad leader wavered on his feet even as his sword fell from a nearly severed hand. Unarmed, he looked up and stared bravely at the killer in front of him.

"NO!!! NO!!!" screamed Yahiko. But his cries went unacknowledged as the Hitokiri Battousai mercilessly decapitated his helpless opponent

with a single efficient stroke.

Sano rushed to Yahiko just as the boy sagged to his knees.

"No... it can't be... NO!!!"

The Battousai seemed oblivious to the commotion behind him as he flicked the blood from his sword, then wiped it clean.

"Yahiko, what's wrong!?" Sano was appalled to see tears pouring down Yahiko's anguished face.

"No... not him... anyone but him...", sobbed the boy.

The red-haired swordsman sheathed his weapon. Only then did Sano realized that the killer in front of him was not carrying the familiar sakabatou, but rather the traditional daisho -- a pair of swords comprising of a katana and a wakizashi.

The Battousai turned and stared in their direction with cold, golden eyes just as Yahiko rose to his feet, grabbed hold of his shinai and charged.

"Yahiko!" cried Sano.

The hitokiri made no apparent move to fend off Yahiko's attack, but Sano knew just how meaningless that lack of motion was. The man in front of them was a master of battou-jutsu... a killer capable of cutting a trained opponent down in less than a blink of an eye.

(That's why they call him the Battousai....)

Yahiko didn't seem to care that he was charging into certain death. With a final scream, he swung at the red-haired killer in front of him... and hit absolutely nothing.

It wasn't that the Battousai evaded Yahiko's attack. He hadn't moved at all. Yahiko's shinai had passed right through him.

(Like attacking a cloud of smoke... or a ghost....) Sano felt a distinct shiver of dread.

Even as the boy stumbled to a halt and spun around, the Battousai calmly walked down the street, past a stunned Sano, and disappeared around a corner.

"Holy...", whispered Sano. He turned to see Yahiko stumble over to the side of the street. The boy fell to his knees and stared at the squad leader's head which now rested in the gutter.

"Yahiko...?"

The boy slowly reached out his hand. Just before he could touch the head, it wavered and disappeared... just like all the unfamiliar wooden buildings surrounding them. Sano and Yahiko found themselves standing -- or kneeling -- in the middle of a now familiar street, barely a block away from the clinic.

Sano started yanking on his hair and shouted, "What the hell's going

on!?"

Yahiko remained motionless, staring blankly at the exact spot where the decapitated head had been.

"Yahiko... Why did you...? I mean, did you know... that guy?"

The boy's answer absolutely floored Sano.

"He's... he WAS... my father...."

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> (end of part 8) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

I would like to express my greatest thanks and appreciation to Julie Farel, the author of the terrific RK fanfic called "Friendship", for providing the inspiration for the encounter between Yahiko's father and the Hitokiri Battousai! You can find it in the Hiten Mitsurugi Ryuu RK fanfic archive at:

<http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Pagoda/7767/>

Next part: Evil things are lurking.... ^\_^

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### 3. Parts 09-11

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Rurouni Kenshin - "That Which Lingers" (Parts 9-11) by Madamhydra

This story is set in my own ALTERNATE REALITY universe which I've called "The Nightwitch Tales" -- think of it as Rurouni Kenshin mixed with various supernatural and paranormal elements. Other stories in this alternate reality are: "Night Visitor"; "All in the Family"; "Romancing the Wolf"

WARNING: This story is "semi-dark" -- it has dark elements  
> (violence, profanity, etc.) but it's not a darkfic! Actually, there's <br> quite a bit of romance in it.... ^\_-

This story takes place after the end of the Kyoto story arc. After that, it takes a sharp left turn into its own world. Elements of the Revenge story arc show up later on in the story. The Kenshin Gumi

already know that Saitoh survived the destruction of Shishio's stronghold.

As always, C&C is greatly appreciated! ^\_^

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THAT WHICH LINGERS: A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra

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Part 9: REGRESSION

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> Disclaimer<br>

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> Text Conventions<br>

( ) are character thoughts

> <p>

/ / and // // represent various sorts of mental dialogue

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\* ----- \* marks the start/end of dreams or flashbacks

> <p>

[ ] denote visual or time notes

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[the present, Meiji 11, Tokyo, late summer]

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Sano gaped at Yahiko. "Your... father!?"

The boy nodded silently as he continued to stare at the corpse that was no longer there... or perhaps it had never really been there to begin with.

"But... I mean... how can you possibly know what your father looked like? You were just a baby when Kenshin was... in Kyoto."

In a dull voice, Yahiko said, "My mother used to draw pictures of my father for me. She had a gift for that sort of thing... but being an artist didn't pay enough to feed both herself and a child... so she took up work as a... pleasure woman."

After a long silence, Sano said very quietly, "So... what are you going to do about it?"

Yahiko laughed bitterly. "What can I do? Tell Kenshin?"

"I suppose you could...."

His shoulders shook as he said angrily, "My father's been dead for over 10 years! Nothing's going to bring him back. And... he died honorably, fighting for what he thought was right... just like Kenshin did. Besides... we don't even know if any of this is real! Who the hell knows what's going on!? And I can't go up to Kenshin and just ask him if he really killed my father!"

"Why not?"

Yahiko glared at him. "Come on, Sano! How did you think the Battousai got his reputation? How many people do you think he killed in Kyoto? A hundred? Two hundred? More than that!? How could he possibly know all their names? Do you think he'd remember all those faces!?"

Sano thought, (I don't know. Maybe HE would....)

The boy stared at the shinai dangling loosely in his hands and whispered, "I was just a baby when my father died. Kenshin... Kenshin's been more of a father to me than a man I know only from my mother's stories and pictures. I don't want... I don't want to lose that over something that might be just some big fat lie!"

"You think someone might be jerking us around?" Sano's thought drifted back to last night's dream. If it WAS a trick, it seemed pretty pointless. He hated Saitoh's guts already. That dream didn't change things for him... well, not much.

(I know that Saitoh's one hell of a cold-blooded killer -- he probably enjoys it! -- but mercilessly tracking down and slaughtering a helpless woman... that was entirely different from killing a man who can fight back.) Sano gave Yahiko a speculative look. (Do you really think it's a trick... or are you desperate to believe it didn't happen?)

Yahiko slowly got to his feet. He mumbled, "I guess we should get back."

Sano reached out and patted the boy on the shoulder. "Are you going to tell Kenshin and the others anything?"

"....I guess so. It could be important. But Sano...."

"Yeah?"

"Don't tell Kenshin about... the stuff about my father, okay?"

"....Sure."

As they trudged back to the clinic, Yahiko thought about one of the very few personal items he had managed to keep over the last several years as an orphan. It was lying back in his room at the Kamiya dojo and wasn't much... just a single sheet of paper....

....his mother's last and best picture of his father.

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Although Aoshi spoke with a perfectly straight face, Kenshin thought he caught a definite undercurrent of... wry humor?... in his voice.

(I don't know what happened to him, but somehow... it's like something's come to life inside him.)

Misao gave Aoshi a wide-eyed stare. He looked rather pale and she could see faint but definite signs of pain around the eyes and the mouth. However, he seemed to be fairly good shape, all things considered. She reached out and put her hand on his forehead.

(He's not feverish, thank goodness!)

Aoshi's eyes widened slightly as he caught of glimpse of Kenshin's hair, but all he said was, "What's going on?"

Kenshin replied as he gazed worriedly at Kaoru. "Saitoh brought up the possibility that the black sword was poisoned."

Kaoru added in tired voice, "She got... a little scared."

Slowly turning red with acute embarrassment, Misao slid off of Aoshi and sat on the edge of his bed. "Okay... I admit it. I overreacted a bit."

Tokio murmured, "I really don't think the sword's poisoned. As you can see for yourself, Shinomori-san is recovering quite nicely."

Misao glared at Saitoh and yelled, "You... you bastard! You DELIBERATELY said that just to make me panic, didn't you!?"

He looked bored. "Don't flatter yourself, girl. It was a perfectly valid possibility."

"You... YOU...!!!" She tensed as if ready to pounce on the policeman.

Kenshin quickly stepped in front of Misao and said, "Maa maa! Take it easy." He knew that Saitoh would not hesitate to hit and possibly hurt Misao if she tried to attack him. And if that happened, Aoshi would most likely get involved....

(Poor girl. Misao's always been excitable, but with all the things happening since yesterday -- especially her nearly fatal attack Aoshi



-- it's no wonder her emotions are running a bit wild. And Saitoh certainly isn't helping matters.)

The faintly malicious smile on Saitoh's face told Kenshin that the policeman was enjoying the little sideshow immensely.

A low groan from the neighboring bed broke the tension. They all turned to see Megumi sitting up and rubbing the back of her head.

"Owww...."

Kenshin quickly walked over and said, "Megumi-dono, how are you feeling?"

"What... what happened? I've got such a headache.... Oh, no. Don't tell me I drank too much sake!"

As Kaoru chuckled, Saitoh approached Megumi's bed and gave her a cold, malevolent stare. "I suppose you don't remember a thing about trying to skewer my wife, hm?"

"Eh!?"

"How convenient," Saitoh drawled.

"Megumi-dono, what's the last thing you remember?"

"Hmmm. I went to check on Shinomori.... That's about it. What happened?"

Kenshin sighed quietly. "Do you remember that black katana that Misao used to attack Aoshi?" When she nodded slowly, he said, "Well, you tried your best to use it to kill Tokio-dono."

"I WHAT!? That's... that's impossible! I may know how to handle a scalpel and a kitchen knife, but what do I know about swords!?" But even as she said this, Megumi eyed Saitoh nervously. Something told her that he was not about the matter slide so quite so easily.

Saitoh murmured in venomous tones, "At the most basic level, there's not that much to know. A sword has a sharp edge and a sharp tip, just like a knife or scalpel. I'm sure it wasn't hard for an intelligent woman like yourself to figure out the rest."

Kenshin said sharply, "But this situation was very much different, as you well know, Saitoh." Turning back to Megumi, he quietly said, "It seems what happened to Misao also happened to you. When you picked up that sword, your behavior changed radically and you tried to kill the first person you saw."

Tokio murmured, "That's not entirely correct, Kenshin-san. I don't think I was her true intended victim. You see, just before she attacked me, Megumi said that she couldn't decide who should be first... Sano or you."

"Then... then Misao was... right? That sword's cursed?" the doctor whispered.

Kenshin nodded slowly. "Superstitious as it may sound, there appears to be something about that blade which drives people to murder."

"The preferred target appears to be people with close emotional relationships to the sword's user. But it seems that anyone nearby will do." The policeman eyed the securely wrapped bundle slung over Kenshin's shoulder. "Call it a curse if you like, but whatever it is, it seems to be the only explanation why Mr. Honami murdered his entire family for no apparent reason. And it probably explains this whole series of murders that have occurred in Tokyo recently."

"You think that this sword is the common link?" whispered Misao. "I can see how someone who's been... possessed... might slaughter his whole family... but you said yourself that the different murdered families weren't connected to each other in any way."

"Moron, what does that have to do with it?" Saitoh gave the girl a contemptuous stare.

Kaoru coughed and said, "Misao, there's something about the sword that... that seems to attract people. All you have to do is see it and you...."

"....you get this crazy impulse to pick it up," the ninja girl whispered softly. "So that's it.... After a cluster of murders, the sword somehow gets dropped or lost, then the next passerby...."

"The next person who sees it can't resist picking it up. And the cycle repeats itself," said the red-haired swordsman.

"That's... that's HIDEOUS! It's like some sort of a plague!"

Kenshin murmured, "A plague of madness...."

Aoshi quietly added, "That's not the worst of it. Not only does it drive its victim into a homicidal rage, it also gives the user both the skill and physical ability to kill with deadly efficiency." He glanced at Misao. "When you attacked me, you were fast... nearly as fast as Himura-san and perhaps even stronger. You're hurting, aren't you?"

Misao blinked. "Yes. I'm really, really sore all over."

Kenshin nodded in agreement and said, "Probably because you... or rather, the sword was forcing your body well beyond its normal physical limits. Thankfully, you're young and in superb physical shape, Misao. Otherwise, you could have torn your own body apart or burst your heart from all that exertion."

Megumi whispered, "Is that why I feel so exhausted?"

"Yes, Megumi-dono. Unlike Misao, who's been training continuously since she was quite young, you aren't in such good physical condition. Fortunately, you weren't fighting nearly as long as she was."

"Himura, what are we going to do!?" the ninja girl said anxiously.

Saitoh calmly said, "The preferred option is to destroy the sword. If that's not feasible, it may be necessary to find a secure place to hide it."

Misao gave the policeman an intensely suspicious stare. "I don't get this. I'd think that you, of all people, wouldn't believe in superstitious stuff like curses and possession!"

"That's basically irrelevant. I deal with facts and the fact is that the sword Himura's carting around has already driven you, the fox-lady, and most likely Mr. Homani to mass murder or attempted murder. You may be incredibly stupid, temperamental, and scatterbrained, but you're not a raving killer."

"I'm WHAT!?" she shrieked. Fortunately, Aoshi managed to grab a hold of Misao before she managed to jump off the bed in an attempt to attack Saitoh.

The front door to the clinic slid open as Sano and Yahiko stumbled in. They both looked very grim and very upset.

Kenshin worriedly said, "What happened to you?" He cocked his head slightly as he noticed Yahiko giving him an intense, searching stare. "Yahiko? Are you all right?"

He reached out to touch the boy's shoulder. Yahiko flinched slightly, then relaxed.

Misao said, "You guys look like you've seen a ghost!"

"Maybe we did...", mumbled Sano.

"Huh?"

Sano glanced at Yahiko. After the boy slowly nodded, Sano told them exactly what happened on the way back from the dojo. As he promised, the only thing the fighter left out was the identity of the dead squad leader. He finished up by saying, "One minute, there's all these bodies lying in the street. The next second... poof! Not a trace."

Kenshin was looking very somber himself. "You... saw me?"

Yahiko felt Kenshin begin to withdraw within himself as he started to lift his hand off the boy's shoulder. Yohiko suddenly reached up with his own hand to keep Kenshin's hand where it was. The swordsman stared at him in confusion, but the boy refused to meet those haunted violet eyes.

Kaoru protested, "It can't be Kenshin! He never left the clinic for a moment!"

Sano looked his friend straight in the eye. "Listen, Jo-chan. I'm not saying that Kenshin was actually there. But I know what I saw. You couldn't mistake the hair or the scars. It was you, Kenshin... or to be precise, it was the Hitokiri Battousai." He caught Misao and Aoshi exchanging looks.

Misao quietly said, "Himura... you asked me earlier how I knew you wore your hair up in Kyoto, right?"

There was a long pause, then Kenshin very quietly said, "Yes?"

The ninja girl fiddled nervously with the end of her braid. "Last night... I dreamed I was in Kyoto back then... during the Bakamatsu no Douran. I saw the Battousai fighting a squad of Shinsengumi."

As Kenshin's violet eyes widened in shock, Kaoru struggled to sit up. She said, "Misao, are you SURE? I mean... you were dreaming, right?"

Aoshi quietly said, "Quite sure. I had nearly the exact same dream." He glanced at Megumi. "And Dr. Takani was in my dream too, if only for a moment."

Megumi gasped as she abruptly recalled her semi-nightmares of the previous night. "You saw me? I remember now.... I ran into you."

"And you ran away."

Misao stared at Aoshi. "You... you mean you had the same dream as I did? The EXACT same dream? Then... then the things I told you... and you told me...."

Aoshi calmly cut her off by saying, "I remember everything we discussed, Misao... everything."

The ninja girl inexplicably began to blush all over. "Aoshi-sama...."

Saitoh drawled, "This is all very interesting. But there's more important matters to deal with...."

Sano suddenly said, "Saitoh, have you ever killed a woman?"

"Why would you ask such a stupid question like that?"

"Just give me a straight answer, damn it!"

With his hand still on Yahiko's shoulder, Kenshin said softly, "Sano...."

The policemen stared down at the fighter. In a cynical voice, he said, "You're a naive fool if you think that greed, corruption, and evil are the sole providence of men. And it is the unexpected or unsuspected persons who often do the most damage."

As Sano gave him a blatantly skeptical stare, Saitoh gave him an evil little smile and said, "Just ask Himura Battousai. He knows that from first-hand experience."

All eyes turned to Kenshin who slowly removed his hand from Yahiko's shoulder. He stared at Saitoh with no particular expression as his other hand casually came to rest on the hilt of his sakabatou.

Sano sharply said, "I'm not asking Kenshin. I'm asking YOU."

"And I gave you an answer, you fool."

Kenshin thought, (Yes, Sano. He answered your question. Can you understand? Back then, it didn't matter who it was... man or woman... adult or child... if anyone interfered with what we perceived to be our duty... they died. For Saitoh, that duty was 'Aku Soku Zan'... 'Kill Evil Instantly'. For myself, it was defending the lives of the members of the Ishin Shishi by whatever means necessary.)

Sano stared at the two men standing in front of him. Saitoh, the relentless hunter with the cold, amber eyes... Kenshin, the resolute protector with warm, violet eyes still haunted by past darkness....

(There will never be men like that again....)

Tokio said, "I hope you won't mind waiting a little bit longer for your food. Megumi and I are going to check on Shinomori-san's and Kaoru's injuries. As soon as that's done, I'll cook lunch for everyone."

Megumi managed to get out of bed without too much trouble and said, "I'm sure you've done an excellent job of taking care of them, Tokio-san, while I was... was...."

Tokio gave the doctor's shoulder a reassuring pat. "Whatever happened had nothing to do with you. It wasn't your fault."

The others left the wardroom, leaving Tokio and Megumi to quietly confer over Kaoru. As they waited in the main room of the clinic, Yahiko and Misao wrestled with their own private thoughts. Saitoh lurked in the background, but said nothing as Kenshin took the opportunity to tell Sano about Megumi's recovery, the various dreams about Kyoto, and finally their theories about the black sword.

"What's the big deal? How hard can it be to get rid of that damned sword? Or hide it so no one will find it again?" complained Sano.

Saitoh glanced at Kenshin. "Do you want to tell the chicken-brain or shall I?"

"Saitoh...." growled Sano.

Kenshin said, "It may be too late for such an easy solution."

"What?"

"We were recognized."

The fighter growled, "I still don't get it!" Saitoh snorted audibly.

"Sano, when we were confronting Megumi last night, do you remember what she said?"

"Uh... I wasn't really paying that much attention...."

"She said, 'Battousai... and Saitoh.... Both of you... I've found you, at last!'"

"You mean... somehow you think this curse has somehow latched itself onto you. You and Saitoh?"

"It's a possibility. All these dreams of Kyoto -- during both night and day, sleeping and awake -- they only started after that fight with Megumi... after we were recognized and named."

"Oh shit...." Sano groaned. "But... how about you guys? Did either you have strange dreams last night?"

Kenshin said, "I didn't... at least, none that I remember."

Saitoh made a careless negative gesture.

"Man, this gets weirder and weirder."

-----

When Tokio finally reemerged from the wardroom, Misao and Sano barraged her with questions about Kaoru and Aoshi. Kenshin was much too polite to join in, but he was obviously worried about Kaoru's condition. Saitoh's wife serenely waited for the storm to subside before replying.

"Misao, Aoshi seems to be improving steadily. All he really needs is rest." She turned to Kenshin. "Megumi took a look at Kaoru's injury. The cut's healing very well and there aren't any signs of infection."

Kenshin stared at her. "Then why is she so weak? If her wound isn't infected and if there doesn't appear to be anything like poison on that sword, what's wrong...."

Tokio gave him a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry. I just don't know. She's physically exhausted. It's like something's wearing her down."

As she went to the kitchen to prepare lunch, Kenshin followed her. "Tokio-dono, we all greatly appreciate your help, especially with so many of us being injured... but perhaps it would be best for you to go home. I don't want to get you any further involved in this trouble. Besides, what about Eiji? I saw him running out of the clinic yesterday afternoon."

Tokio calmly drained the greens and started slicing them briskly. "Please don't worry about Eiji. He's very independent for his age and my maid can take care of his meals for several days. And if you will pardon me for saying so, I think it would be best if I stayed away from Eiji until this matter is settled."

"Don't concern yourself with my wife, Battousai. Worry about your own woman," Saitoh said as he walked into the kitchen.

"She could be in danger if she stays, Saitoh!"

The policeman shrugged. "Tokio knows the risks. If she wants to stay,

she stays."

She gave Kenshin a warm smile. "Besides, Kenshin-san, I would feel very badly about deserting Kaoru, Megumi, and the others at the moment. Don't worry about me. You just concentrate on whatever needs to be done."

As he watched Tokio cooking with the same serene competence that she displayed in everything she did, Kenshin thought, (Yes, she understands the risks and her husband all too well. Tokio's fully prepared to allow her husband to do whatever he feels is necessary, regardless of the cost to her... death, if need be. She refuses to be a liability to him.)

(But she's not the sort of woman to sit by helplessly and let things happen to her, either. Her husband trusts her to take care of herself. She will not fail that trust. Saitoh Tokio will defend herself -- and what she considers as hers -- to the utmost of her considerable ability... just like the way she did when she confronted a murderous, sword-wielding Megumi with nothing more than a metal basin....)

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[the present, the Aoiya restaurant in Kyoto]

Omasu burst into the kitchen with her arms full of groceries.

Her fellow female Oniwabanshuu glared at her and yelled, "Where have you been!? We've got to get all this food ready for the dinner crowd...."

"You'll never believe what someone just told me in the marketplace!"

Okon muttered, "What are you babbling about? Start washing that cabbage!"

"Okay, okay!"

"All right, what's the big news?"

"Ghosts!"

"Wha... ghosts!? Oh, come on!"

"It's true! Last night, apparently dozens of different people saw ghosts walking in the streets of Kyoto!"

"What? That's ridiculous!"

"It's true! And get this! Old Mogumi-san down the street SWORE she saw a procession of Shinsengumi appear out of nowhere and disappear just as suddenly!"

"Shinsengumi!? What the...? The old woman must be going senile!"

Omasu went on breathlessly, "And there were stories about people hearing the sound of clashing swords and screaming outside their

houses, but whenever they looked, the streets were empty! And that's not all!"

"There's more?" was Okon's skeptical reply.

Omasu pouted. "Yes, there is. They say that people are still seeing these ghosts, even though it's daytime!"

Her friend glanced out the window at the dark gloomy sky which was filled with roiling black clouds.

"With weather like this, there's not much difference between night and day...."

The door to the kitchen suddenly opened. They all turned and froze when they saw Okina standing in the doorway. For a horrified instant, they thought that the old man had suffered some sort of seizure or stroke. He looked incredibly pale and he was mumbling incoherently.

Omasu ran up to him and said, "What's wrong!?"

"I... I saw him...."

"Who?" asked a bewildered Okon.

"My... my old friend... Ichishino.... I saw him in the garden drinking tea...."

"So!?" both women shouted.

Okina sat down abruptly on the floor and yelled back, "But he's been DEAD for the past 12 years!"

-----

Elsewhere in Kyoto, in an old rickety house that was once an expensive mansion, an old woman cackled madly to herself and mumbled something about time folding back on itself.

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[the present, Tokyo]

Lunch turned out to be a rather subdued affair. Despite the excellent food, it seemed that only Saitoh had much of an appetite. After the meal was cleared away, everyone sat around the table staring at the bundle that contained the black sword. Despite protests from both Misao and Kenshin, Aoshi and Kaoru insisted on joining the discussion.

"Now what?" Misao muttered.

Saitoh calmly drank his tea and said, "Don't look at me. I'm hardly an expert in this area."

Tokio gracefully poured her husband another cup. "Then perhaps you should consult an expert."



They all turned to stare at her. "Do you know of such a person?" said Kenshin.

"I know of a few priests and scholars in Tokyo who have some knowledge of the occult. If they can't help you, then they should be able to direct you to a more knowledgeable person."

"How do you know people like that?" Misao asked in amazement.

Tokio smiled, "I collect old stories and folklore. I've met many different people during my research. Hopefully some of them will be able to help you deal with this sword."

Kenshin quietly began to unwrap the sword. "I think I remember seeing a family crest somewhere on the hilt. That might give us some clues...."

Sano watched him uneasily. "You WILL be careful with that thing, won't you?"

Kenshin smiled quietly. "Believe me, Sano. I'm not eager to do this, but we need to know...."

Suddenly, the room darkened and the temperature plummeted. In an instant, the warm, homely clinic vanished. Everyone found themselves standing in a cold, deserted street.

Misao ran over to Aoshi's side and huddled against him for warmth. "Brrrrr! What's going on!?"

Saitoh looked around and muttered, "It's Kyoto."

Sano groaned. "No, not Kyoto again! Why does everything keep going back to Kyoto, of all places!? Kenshin...." When he didn't get a response, he turned and said, "Kenshin?"

The red-haired swordsman was staring at a group of three men walking down the street in their direction. The group consisted of a plump, elderly man and two samurai. One of the samurai was large and massively built while the other was slim and almost painfully young. The large samurai carried a package in one hand while the smaller one carried a lantern. Oblivious to the presence of the others, the three men idly chatted about the young man's fiancée.

Kaoru heard Kenshin utter a soft gasp.

Suddenly, a shadowy figure appeared behind the three men and said in a cold, detached voice, "Apparently you are Kyoto administrator Jubei Shigekura. Nothing personal, however, I wish to take your lives."

The large samurai dropped his package and went for his sword. "Who're you..."

"Choshu Ishinshishi... Himura Battousai," as a red-haired young man -- a teenager really -- stepped out of the shadows.

Kaoru stared in astonishment. (He's... he's so YOUNG!)

The next few seconds passed in a blur of flashing steel and blood.

The young Battousai cut down the old man and the large samurai with a single stroke apiece, then he closed with the smaller samurai. There was a brief exchange of blows as the Battousai's badly outmatched opponent somehow managed to fend off the assassin's blade. A final exchange of slashes... then the young man collapsed, nearly disemboweled by the Battousai's brutally precise sword stroke... but the red-haired assassin had not escaped unscathed.

There were gasps from the stunned observers as they watched blood trickle from a long cut on the Battousai's left cheek. He briefly touched his wound and stared at the blood on his fingers. The Battousai then silently turned and plunged his sword into the back of the young, mortally wounded samurai as he crawled along the ground in a last futile attempt to escape the clutches of death.

The Battousai cast the blood off his sword, sheathed it, and walked away. But the young killer stopped suddenly, then turned to look behind him. Impossible as it might seem, the Battousai was undeniably aware of Kenshin's presence. Cold golden eyes gazed into stunned violet eyes as the two Himuras stared at each other across the bridge of years.

(I know you. You are me. I am you.)

The Battousai finally turned away and disappeared into the murky darkness, leaving the watchers alone in a cold Kyoto street with three dead men.

Kenshin slowly sank to his knees in the blood-covered street as he slowly reached up to touch the cross scar on his face.

"Kiyosato Akira...", he whispered. And with that name there always came another. "Tomoe...."

The scene in front of them wavered like a mirage, then vanished.

They found themselves back in the main room of Dr. Genzai's clinic. Kenshin was still on his knees and still motionless. But this time, the vision... or illusion... or dream... did not vanish without a trace.

Kenshin's hakama were unmistakably stained with fresh blood....

....and still more blood trickled steadily between his fingers from one half of the cross scar on his face... a scar that had not bled for nearly 14 years.

Sometime during the past few moments, people gravitated to others for reassurance. Yahiko hovered anxiously near Kaoru. Misao quietly clung to Aoshi who put a comforting hand on her shoulder, while Megumi leaned against Sano for support.

"Kenshin?" Kaoru whispered.

The red-haired swordsman rose to his feet, still graceful even in his dazed state, and slowly walked outside the clinic. As the blood continued to seep from his scar, Kenshin sank down on the porch and stared vacantly at the yard, its stone walls and modest vegetation

seemingly awash in blood from the reddish light of the setting sun.

As the others stared wordlessly after Kenshin, Tokio put her hand on her husband's arm and murmured, "Hajime-san...."

Surprisingly, Saitoh wasn't watching Kenshin. Instead, he was looking up at the spectacular reds and purples of the evening sky. There was a faint tone of bemusement in Saitoh's voice as he absently replied, "Isn't it a trifle forward for a respectable young lady like yourself to be on a first name basis with a man she's only known for a few days?"

There was a long... a very long... silence as everyone -- except for Kenshin -- slowly turned to stare at Saitoh.

Tokio's eyes went wide with astonishment, but she managed to answer with an unbelievable amount of composure, given the circumstances.

"Hajime... it's been 15 years since we first met in Kyoto... and we've been married for over EIGHT of them...."

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> (end of part 9) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Q: What's worse than a hitokiri losing his mind?  
> <p>

A: Two of them! ::maniacal laughter::

Next part: A few minor mental glitches. ^\_^

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THAT WHICH LINGERS: A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra

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Part 10: CONSOLATION

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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

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Tokio's eyes went wide with astonishment, but she managed to answer with an unbelievable amount of composure, given the circumstances.

"Hajime... it's been nearly 15 years since we first met in Kyoto... and we've been married for over EIGHT of them...."

Saitoh froze, then turned very slowly to look at his wife.

Sano frantically thought, (Oh shit, oh shit, OH SHIT!!! Not only does Kenshin look like he's totally out of it, but Saitoh... SAITOH, of all people... is losing it, too!)

At that moment, Sano almost wished he WAS a chickenhead, like Saitoh kept calling him. That would give him a perfectly good excuse to run around in circles screaming in mindless panic. He had hoped and prayed for the day that he would see Saitoh Hajime REALLY shaken up. He got his wish... sort of.

For a brief instant, Saitoh gave Tokio a blank, disbelieving stare, then he winced slightly and rubbed his forehead with his hand, as if trying to massage away a mild headache.

It didn't look like much of a reaction, but to Sano and the others, those little gestures of discomfort were the equivalent of an ordinary person going into hysterics.

(I think that's probably about as close as the cold-blooded bastard's ever going get to expressing REAL panic,) thought Sano.

Saitoh suddenly shook his head sharply, dropped his hand to his side, and gazed steadily at Tokio with an expression that was a fairly close approximation to his usual cynical and faintly malicious demeanor.

Misao's head kept swivelling back and forth between a nearly catatonic Kenshin sitting outside and Saitoh, who continued to stare at his wife with a faint frown on his face. As for Tokio, she seemed unruffled by her husband's narrow-eyed scrutiny.

"Wha... wha... WHAT THE HELL'S GOING ON!?!?" Misao flung up her hand and wailed.

Even the usually inscrutable Aoshi looked dumbfounded.

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Tokio discretely guided her husband to a stool in the neighboring room, then stood in front of him, shielding Saitoh from view. While he had managed to regain most of his usual composure, Tokio knew better than anyone else just how unnerved he was by the whole incident.

"Hajime?" she murmured, lightly resting a hand on his shoulder.

He didn't answer immediately, then finally said, "Tokio."

"Yes, I'm here."

"What happened?"

"I think you had an abrupt memory lapse."

"How so?"

With a rueful little smile, Tokio murmured, "You asked me why a respectable young lady like myself was calling you by your first name after only a few day's acquaintance."

"I WHAT?" He blinked, then started to swear furiously under his breath.

With her body blocking the view of casual observers, she gently caressed his face with her fingers. Saitoh reached up and touched her hand, his fingers lingering on hers for a brief instant.

Gazing into his amber eyes and noting the faintly appalled expression in them, she said, "Are you all right now?"

"I think so. Damn."

Saitoh Hajime did not consider himself a fanciful person, but somehow he knew that there was no way he could possibly forget Tokio... his awareness of her seemed indelibly imprinted, not in the mind, but in some other, much more profound part of him. That part would always remember her....

No, he hadn't forgotten Tokio herself... but for an instant, he HAD forgotten so many details about his wife.

(How could I have suddenly forgotten almost everything that's happened between us?)

Saitoh muttered, "And I called you a 'respectable young lady'?"

(That's going a LONG way back in the past....)

When he had first met her, Saitoh HAD thought of Tokio as a typical, modest daughter of a wealthy, highly respected samurai family... but that was a decade and a half ago.

He would never forget the day he first saw her, standing in the garden of her senile old uncle's home. Saitoh had only been 20 years old, but already a leader of the Shinsengumi... she was a 15 year old girl, charming but rather innocent and sheltered... or so it seemed at the time. He had learned better soon enough....

If the times had been different, he probably would have started courting her on the spot. But the country was at war and he was Shinsengumi... he had no time or energy to spare for anything except his duty. He saw her again on several occasions over the next year or so. And then there was that night 13 years ago when she had saved his life for the first time....

He uttered a sharp bark of laughter. "A young lady you might have been, but 'respectable'? Not nearly."

With a faint gleam of amusement in her eyes, Tokio murmured, "My family is perfectly respectable. You said so yourself."

"Until I found out what your grandmother and that pack of old crones...."

"If you're referring to my esteemed, elderly female relatives....," she corrected mildly.

"....pack of old crones were teaching you and your younger cousins." Saitoh snorted. What a shock THAT had been....

Tokio said primly, "It's only proper that a young lady be able to defend herself and the honor of her husband and family."

"Defend herself, yes. But your family's standards of what constitutes 'self-defense' are extreme, to say the least."

His wife placidly shrugged.

Saitoh scowled. These things and so many others... where had nearly 15 years of his memories gone... if only for a brief instant?

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Misao stared out the door at the setting sun. "Aoshi-sama.... It was barely noon when this... vision... started...."

"Yes."

"And now the sun's almost completely set...."

"I know," he replied quietly.

"But... what we saw... it couldn't have taken Himura more than a few minutes to kill those men!" She stared anxiously at him.

"Time's a highly subjective thing, Misao. You should know that by now."

She eyed the partially unwrapped black sword with loathing. (We can't just leave it like that....) She took few steps toward the table. As she reached out, Aoshi grabbed her shoulder with the speed of a striking viper.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to wrap it up again. Maybe it'll prevent this... vision or illusion thing from happening again. Besides, I can't STAND looking at it any more."

"But Misao, if you touch it...."

Seeing the faint but distinct signs of concern on Aoshi's face, she gripped his hand with her good hand. "Don't worry, Aoshi-sama. I'll be really careful. The thing makes my skin crawl... but someone has to do it."

He stared down at her and saw both the tightly controlled fear and the resolve on her face. He glanced at the blade. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, but he found the weapon undeniably repulsive. It seemed to drain every bit of the rapidly fading sunlight from the room....

Quietly, he said, "You only have one working hand. I'll help you."

They both cautiously approached the table, almost as if the sword was a dangerous beast capable of turning on them in an instant.

(Maybe it can...,) he thought uneasily.

As they gingerly gathered up the edges of the blanket, Aoshi took the opportunity to take a good look at the sword hilt.

"Take a look at this hilt ornament. You see the same animal design in the tsuba."

Misao peered closely at the hilt, then at the guard, taking great care not to touch the weapon. "It... it looks like a dog in a weird pose, but I don't recognize it. Do you think it's some sort of family crest?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. It's a clue, at least."

As they quickly shrouded the sword under multiple layers of blanket and tied the bundle tight, Misao muttered, "I... I suppose we could... remove the hilt and take a look at the sword's tang for any inscriptions." She looked absolutely nauseated by the idea of handling that ominous black sword so much.

Aoshi didn't look at all happy with the idea, either. "That's the obvious thing to do, but we should discuss it with the others first."

Misao glanced around the clinic. She was probably the only person who could see Tokio quietly talking to Saitoh in one of the clinic's back rooms. The ninja girl blinked in surprise as she watched Saitoh's wife gently brush her fingers against his face. The policeman's response seemed even more amazing to her.

(He's actually... HOLDING... her hand.)

It was only the most fleeting exchange of touches -- easily missed in the blink of an eye -- but Misao was astonished by the feelings of reassurance and intimacy those two simple gestures represented.

(So little... but they can mean so much...,) the ninja girl mused.

-----

"Kenshin."

He didn't seem to hear the soft female voice calling his name, but merely continued to stare at the slowly fading sunlight illuminating the yard.

(Strange... the light... instead of fading, it's turning into a darker shade of red... just another shade of blood....)

There was a brief pause, the rasping sound of a door sliding closed, then someone touched his shoulder.

"Kenshin."

He abruptly snapped out of his trance of painful memories. Kenshin slowly glanced up and said, "Kaoru-dono...."

Pale, yet slightly flushed with fever, she stood in front of him with a look of intense concern on her face. She held out her hand to him.

Unthinkingly, he reached out to take her hand, then froze as he realized that his own hand was covered in blood.

(NO! I can't get her dirty....)

She could see the flash of sorrow and horror in his violet eyes. Before he could pull away, Kaoru quickly knelt down on the porch and grasped his bloodied fingers, holding them tightly.

"No, Kenshin... don't. It's all right. It's just a little blood.... There's nothing wrong with it. It's your own blood, Kenshin...."

With her other hand, she reached out to touch the still bleeding scar on his face. He flinched away slightly from her fingers.

"Kaoru-dono... I...," he whispered in tones of near despair.

She bit her lip, then slowly said, "What we saw... was that... how you got this?" Her fingers lightly brushed along the scar running parallel to his jaw.

He nodded tensely.

"Then... it's blood honorably shed, isn't it? You did... what you did because you thought it was necessary and right. You didn't do it because you enjoyed it or for your own gain."

He whispered, "Sometimes... I don't know what's worse... to kill with joy... or to kill without feeling...."

Kaoru stared at him helplessly. Kenshin usually looked as if he was at most only in his early twenties... just a few years older than herself. But it was times like this when she really felt the difference in their ages... and experience.

He had been through terrible things... there was so much about his life that she didn't know and that she couldn't understand. Losing her parents, struggling to keep the family dojo alive,... all these struggles seemed almost trivial when compared to Kenshin's battle to keep his own soul alive through unspeakable bloodshed and violence... and so much of it committed by his own hands.

Kenshin gasped sharply as he glanced down and saw Kaoru's hands now covered in reddish smears. He tried to pull his hands free, but she clung to them with surprising determination. Unable to face the sight any longer, Kenshin finally turned his head away.

Kaoru stared down at her bloodstained hands. She could feel his blood, warm and sticky on her fingers... and a gradual understanding



began to grow within her. She could only guess at what his thoughts might be, but she abruptly realized that in those smears of blood, she saw something that he had forgotten... or long since dismissed as unimportant.

"Kenshin.... Kenshin, please look at me."

He resisted at first, then reluctantly glanced at her, bracing himself for what he might... what he probably would see.... Describing what he had done as the Hitokiri Battousai was one thing. But no matter how carefully chosen... no matter how eloquently spoken... words could never convey the true horror of those days and nights in Kyoto all those years ago.

But now she had experienced it for herself through her own senses... witnessed his victims' fear with her own eyes... heard their dying screams and moans with her own ears... smelled the blood and entrails lying in the street....

"Kenshin... I can't be sure, but I'm guessing that when you see this blood on both our hands, you're probably thinking of stains that will never go away... sins that must be atoned for."

His hands, slender yet incredibly strong, twitched in her grasp, but she swiftly continued speaking.

"But when I see this blood, I see something else. You talk about the blood you shed... all the people you killed. But... but you never talk about the blood YOU lost... the times you were hurt.... What about your pain, Kenshin?"

He stared at her with wide, violet eyes.

"I.... Kaoru-dono...."

She held up their clasped hands between them. "That's what this blood means to me. Your pain and only that. There's no need to hide it from me, so please don't... go... away again...."

Before he could speak, she shook her head sharply. "I don't mean physically, Kenshin. I mean... in your heart... your mind... your soul.... I can see it. I can see you withdrawing... pulling away." A faint, accusatory tone crept into her voice.

Kenshin hung his head, unable to counter her charges. They were perfectly true.

"Don't leave us again.... Don't leave ME again.... I... I want us to be together...." she whispered in a slightly choked voice.

He looked up and gave her a wistful, yet beautiful smile.

"I won't, Kaoru-dono. And... so do I."

-----

(Go, Jo-chan!) Sano silently cheered as he watched Kaoru step outside to speak to Kenshin, closing the door behind her.

Although no one inside the clinic could actually hear the quiet conversation between Kenshin and Kaoru, through some trick of the light, they could all SEE it. The silhouettes against the translucent paper of the closed door were slightly blurred around the edges, but they still showed every little movement... every little touch... in almost uncanny detail, just like an elegant shadow puppet show.

-----

To Misao, the shadowy movements of Kenshin and Kaoru seemed to be eerily similar to what she saw going on between Saitoh and Tokio. And just like Saitoh and Tokio, the only physical contact between the two people on the porch was the fleeting touch of fingers and the holding of hands.

She could only hear the blurred murmur of voices -- mostly Kaoru's -- but Misao didn't need the exact words. Somehow she understood what they were saying just from their body language.

....Kaoru extending her hand to Kenshin....

....Kenshin tentatively reaching to take her hand....  
> <p>

....his abrupt flinch and retreat....

....Kaoru sinking to her knees and holding his hand....  
> <p>

....Kaoru slowly touching his face....

....Kenshin constantly looking away, staring downward,... pulling back from her....

....Kaoru always reaching out to him, leaning forward,... drawing him back to her....

Finally... Kaoru holding up their clasped hands between them as the two of them leaned toward each other. And they stayed that way as the last of the sunlight vanished and the outlines of their shadows slowly faded.

Misao sniffled and felt her throat tightening as she watched the silent conversation between Kenshin's and Kaoru's bodies -- a graceful, almost unbearably poignant dance. Hastily wiping at the tears in her eyes, she groped for the closest piece of cloth -- which happened to be the sleeve of Aoshi's bedrobe -- and loudly blew her nose.

Realizing what she had done only after the fact, she turned bright red and stammered, "Aoshi-... Aoshi-sama...."

He gazed at her with no particular expression on his face. But as she stared up into his eyes, Misao saw the imperfectly hidden signs of old pain and regrets... of lingering memories of his own personal darkness only just recently left behind.

She wondered, (Have I been expecting the wrong thing from him? I've been trying to get Aoshi to blurt out his feelings for all the world

to see... but what if he can't?) Her thoughts drifted to their dream conversation of the night before, then she put it together with she had just seen between Kenshin and Kaoru.

(Is that really it? You somehow feel unworthy and besmirched, so you don't want to contaminate me? Is that why you refuse to let the slightest bit of caring and emotion show?)

Something abruptly boiled over in Misao. Without any warning, she suddenly grabbed the collar of Aoshi's bedrobe and yanked his head down to her level. Hissing softly in his ear, she said, "Is that why you waited until you were nearly at death's door for me to tell me that you cared about me, huh?"

"Misao...?" He gave her a faintly bewildered stare.

Keeping her voice low, she snarled, "That's the ONLY reason you bothered to actually say it out loud to me, right? You didn't expect to survive, did you? You fully expected to bleed to death right on top of their graves, didn't you?"

Aoshi eyed her with the same startled stare that a person might bestow upon a cute little rabbit suddenly gone rabid.

"Well, you DID survive and you DID tell me and I'm not about to let you go crawling back behind your walls, got it?" Misao growled angrily into his ear.

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Throughout the entire conversation between Kenshin and Kaoru, the others had tensely watched the shadows moving on the paper walls, afraid to utter a sound. Now they all heaved a silent sigh of relief as Kenshin and Kaoru seemed to come to some sort of happy resolution.

Sano glanced over at Misao whispering into Aoshi's ear and wondered at the nervous, almost hunted expression that suddenly appeared on the man's face.

(What the hell is that girl telling him?)

Then Sano thought he heard Saitoh utter a sharp laugh. He walked over to the back room and asked Tokio, "Is he okay?"

She turned and gave him a slight smile. "I think things are under control for the moment."

Sano gave Tokio a curious look as she calmly stood between Sano and her husband. Kenshin had talked about her strength of will and her determination. He didn't doubt that Kenshin was probably right. It made perfect sense on an intellectual level. Of course Saitoh wouldn't marry someone who couldn't take care of herself.

But when he was actually looking at her... well, that was a completely different story. As a tall, wiry man with a lean, austere, positively cruel face, Saitoh LOOKED dangerous. Any sensible person would be wary of a person like that.

On the other hand, Tokio was a slim woman of medium height, graceful

and exceedingly beautiful in a quiet, understated way. She looked fragile, delicate,... and about as harmless as you could get.

(A she-wolf? Nah, she looks more like a doe. Which makes you wonder how she manages to avoid getting all chewed up from living with Saitoh all these years.) And as for sleeping with that man.... (Ewww... I'm NOT even going to go there....)

As Sano puzzled over Tokio, Saitoh stood up and gave the fighter an icy 'if-you-say-the-wrong-thing-I'll-kill-you-on-the-spot' sort of stare.

Sano wasn't about to say a damn thing at the moment. This wasn't a joking matter. In fact, the current situation was about as unfunny as it could get. But before the fighter could say anything, there was a loud pounding on the outer gate of the clinic compound.

Saitoh rudely brushed Sano out of the way and flung open the front door. He smirked slightly as he stared down at the two startled people still holding hands on the porch. Without the slightest remorse for interrupting the intimate moment between Kenshin and Kaoru, he stalked right between them -- forcing Kenshin to let go of Kaoru's hand -- on his way to the front gate.

Sano snarled, "Why that insensitive, cold-hearted, unfeeling, heartless bastard...." His voice abruptly trailed off as he realized that Tokio was standing right next to him with a mildly curious look in her eyes and a gentle smile on her face. Sano felt his face going bright red with embarrassment.

In the meantime, Megumi quietly drifted to Kaoru's side and handed her a clean, damp cloth. Kaoru accepted it with a quick nod of thanks and gently began to wipe the blood from Kenshin's hand and cheek.

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"Inspector Fujita!"

Saitoh curtly replied, "Yes?"

The policeman waiting outside the gateway gasped, "Sir, an urgent message! I'm supposed to await your answer," and handed over a piece of paper.

Saitoh's eyes narrowed as he read through the note. Refolding it with abrupt movements, he sharply asked the waiting officer, "Are you aware of the contents of this message?"

"Not exactly, sir... but Headquarters is in a quiet uproar about it. It seems impossible, but with so many reports from unrelated sources...."

"Any reports of similar incidents here in Tokyo?"

"Here, sir? Not that I know of."

"Very well, I'll be at headquarters at dawn. Arrange for a carriage and boat passage to Osaka."

"Yes sir! Uh... for how many, sir?"

Saitoh glanced back at the clinic. "Actually, make arrangements for a party of eight to ten. And post an officer outside."

"Yes, sir!"

As Saitoh returned to the clinic, Sano said, "Oy! What's with the sour face?"

Saitoh gave him a particularly nasty look. "It seems that there certain... sightings... in Kyoto."

"Sightings? What the hell do you mean by that?" By this time, Saitoh had attracted everyone's attention.

The policeman smiled slowly. The sight made a chill go down Sano's spine.

"It seems that there've been multiple, credible reports of Shinsengumi and Ishin Shishi forces suddenly appearing in the streets of Kyoto last night."

Kenshin jerked his head up. "WHAT!?"

"They seem to appear, then disappear without a trace. My superiors have apparently decided that they want me in Kyoto to personally investigate these... occurrences."

Tokio walked up to her husband and murmured, "Hajime-san...."

He glanced briefly at his wife and said flatly, "You, too."

Tokio nodded obediently as Misao asked, "Why do they want YOU?"

Kenshin abruptly stood up, his cheek still bleeding, although very slightly.

"Misao, it's because he's one of the very few of the Shinsengumi still alive. The government isn't sure whether this is just some elaborate hoax or something... more mysterious."

"You think it's related to what just happened to us?" Kaoru awkwardly rose to her feet, then staggered slightly.

"Kaoru-dono!" Kenshin swiftly grabbed her to keep her from falling on her face.

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It seemed that the effort of trying to reach Kenshin and to bring him back had drained the last of Kaoru's strength. She didn't protest as he picked her up and put her in bed. He hovered anxiously nearby as Megumi checked Kaoru's temper, then gave Tokio a worried look.

"What's wrong, Megumi-dono?" Kenshin asked.

"Her fever's gone up. Not much," she hastily added, "but it is a bit

worrisome. Really, she should have stayed in bed today. All this activity is just draining her strength unnecessarily."

As Kaoru tossed her head fretfully on the pillow, Tokio pulled the ribbon from Kaoru's hair, then loosely braided the silky black strands to keep them out of the way.

Kaoru mumbled her thanks and curled up under the covers. She was suddenly so tired, she could barely keep her eyes open and her mind seemed eerily disconnected from her aching body.

-----

As Kenshin and Megumi hastily helped Kaoru to bed, Misao and the others all turned to stare at Saitoh. He stared back at them, neither confirming or denying anything.

There was another knock at the door. Recognizing the visitor, Misao was out the door in a flash. There was a quick exchange of words, then she returned holding a piece of paper.

Aoshi frowned slightly, "Isn't that...?"

"Yup." She hastily opened the message and started reading. They all watched in alarm as she went very, very pale.

"Misao?" Aoshi asked sharply.

"It's from Jiya...." She numbly handed it to Aoshi.

Sano, Kenshin, and the others crowded around Aoshi, but couldn't decipher the coded message. He read it through once... then read it again... then read it yet another time.

Finally, Sano snapped, "What does it say!?"

Aoshi looked at Saitoh and answered in a soft whisper.

"The ghosts of the dead are walking in Kyoto."

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> (end of part 10) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: A return to the past and terrible losses. ^\_^

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THAT WHICH LINGERS: A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra

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Part 11: RETALIATION

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<p>

[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

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Aoshi looked at Saitoh and answered in a soft whisper.

"The ghosts of the dead are walking in Kyoto."

While Kenshin stiffened and went pale, Saitoh's reaction was considerably different. He smiled slowly and shrugged dismissively.

"I'm leaving for Kyoto tomorrow by the first available steamship." Glancing at Misao and Aoshi, he drawled in a bored voice, "If you want to come along, be at the harbor police station by dawn."

Misao looked like she couldn't quite decide whether to throw Saitoh's 'offer' back in his sneering face or to accept. She looked at Aoshi. Although he seemed to be recovering nicely, he was also painfully weak and clearly not up to strenuous activity such as traveling by foot.

Aoshi gave Saitoh a cool nod of acknowledgment, then went back to reading Okina's message again.

Saitoh then glanced at Kenshin and raised a mocking eyebrow. In a malevolent sort of purr, the policeman murmured, "Interested in coming to Kyoto, Battousai? If the sightings aren't some moronic hoax, it promises to be QUITE the reunion...."

Kenshin's head jerked around. Sano watched with alarm as his friend's hand moved almost reflexively to hover over the hilt of his sakabatou as the red-haired swordsman glared coldly at Saitoh. And was he imagining things or was there the briefest flash of gold in Kenshin's eyes...?

The red-haired swordsman said coldly, "I'm not in the mood to play games, Saitoh. And if you have any business to settle, we can handle it here and now. There's no need to go to Kyoto to do it."

Saitoh seemed unruffled by Kenshin's unexpectedly hostile response. With an air of malicious amusement, he shrugged and said, "Suit yourself." The policeman's gaze fell on the heavily wrapped black sword lying on the table. "Then you can occupy your time by keeping an eye on that weapon."

"Take care of that damned thing yourself, Saitoh!" Sano angrily shouted.

"Idiot. The situation in Kyoto is messy enough as it is. I have no intention of aggravating matters by carting such an obviously dangerous item into the city."

Curled up under the bed covers, Kaoru made a faint sound of discomfort. However soft, that little noise instantly grabbed

Kenshin's attention and broke the ominous tension between the two old enemies. Shaking his head, Kenshin eased out of his ready stance and said somberly, "He's right, Sano. I don't think that it would be a good idea to take that sword to Kyoto."

Sano felt an definite sense of uneasiness. (For a moment there, I thought they were going to fight it out, here and now. The way he's shifted in and out of the Battousai mood... he doesn't even seem to be aware he did it... and Kenshin's usually a lot more even-tempered than this....)

The fighter abruptly noticed Tokio, who was standing off to the side, her gaze modestly downcast... but Sano sensed that she was paying very, VERY close attention to her husband.

(What the...? It's like she's picked up something odd about Saitoh's behavior, but what could it be? He seems to be acting like his usual, nasty self....)

"Later then, Battousai." Saitoh turned and leisurely strolled out of the clinic. His wife lingered a moment to give them a polite bow of farewell, then followed her husband.

After the Saitohs' departure, Sano muttered, "That ungrateful bastard! He owes you big time for saving his wife's life. And what do you get? Not a damn word of thanks and more of his damned taunting and prodding!"

Kenshin smiled ruefully. "The fact that I helped to save his wife from serious injury undoubtedly irritates him to no end."

Aoshi said quietly, "I'll be leaving for Kyoto tomorrow."

Misao said flatly, "WE'RE leaving for Kyoto tomorrow." Her eyes glittered ferociously as she thought, (Oh no, Aoshi. You're not leaving ME behind any more.)

He gave her a wary look as she turned back to Kenshin. "I really don't want to run out on you guys, but...."

Kenshin smiled gently. "No, Misao-dono. It sounds like Okina's really worried about the situation in Kyoto. He's definitely not the type to panic. If he says that... ghosts from the past... are walking, then it must be more than mere rumor. It's only right that you be there in case he and the others need you."

Aoshi said in a very neutral voice, "Okina says that although he hasn't personally seen any of the supposed Shinsengumi or Ishin Shishi troops, he did have a visitation of his own. An old friend of his who's been dead for over a decade apparently showed up in the Aoiya's garden to drink tea."

Abnormally quiet and subdued ever since the dream-like vision of his father's death... and his father's supposed murderer... Yahiko shivered visibly.

Kenshin glanced at Aoshi and Misao. "If you want to meet Saitoh at dawn, you probably should get as much sleep as you can."

It was a sign of Aoshi's general weakness that he didn't say a word



before heading straight for his bed in the clinic's wardroom.

The ninja girl walked over to Megumi as the doctor continued to monitor Kaoru's condition. Misao whispered, "Will he be able to handle the trip?" tipping her head in Aoshi's direction.

"Yes. Naturally, staying in bed would be the best thing for him, but a sea trip should be no problem." Megumi smiled tiredly. "He should recover completely as long as he doesn't engage in any strenuous activity and reopens those injuries. It's up to you to make sure he takes it easy and gives his body time to recover."

Misao scowled in grim determination. "You got it. Uh... I just wanted to thank you so much for taking such good care of him. I... um, I heard you telling Kaoru that you had a... bad encounter with him at the Kamiya dojo... when he was looking for Kenshin... but he wasn't really himself at the time...."

Megumi shrugged. "I'm a doctor. I do my best for my patients, no matter how unpleasant or how much of an annoyance they are. Just look at Sano here...."

"Hey! What do you mean by that, Fox-lady!?" Sano yelled loudly.

"Shhhhh!" said Kenshin, Megumi, and Misao simultaneously as they all pointed to the semi-dozing Kaoru.

Sano grumbled and stalked off to sulk while Misao went to Megumi's room to get some sleep. That left Kenshin and Megumi alone by Kaoru's bedside.

"Megumi-dono, how is she?" asked Kenshin as he crouched beside the bed. He slowly reached out to touch Kaoru's hand and got a brief squeeze in return. As he stared at her, he thought, (Kaoru... out there on the porch, you lent me so much of your inner strength.... I wish I could help you by giving you some of this supposed strength of mine in return....)

The doctor wearily brushed her hair out of her eyes. "Actually, it seems that her fever's gone down. Perhaps by morning, it'll be gone for good. She's still very weak and I can't explain that. There's no obvious cause like an infection."

They both uttered a tired sigh. Rising to his feet, Kenshin said, "Megumi-dono, after all that's happened, you really need some rest yourself."

"Yes... I suppose so. Oh, by the way, Yahiko brought some fresh clothes for everyone." She glanced uneasily at the bloodstains on his hakama... the blood that hadn't come from Kenshin himself. Those stains had come from an impossible source... a mere dream.

She eyed the carefully wrapped sword lying in the clinic's main room with obvious distaste. Ever since that thing had showed up, the world seemed to make less and less sense. She was a practical woman, not giving to silly superstitions, but all the recent events involving that mysterious black weapon made the strange sightings in Kyoto all too believable.

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Kaoru could hear the sound of Kenshin's and Megumi's voices. They were talking about her... his voice tight with worry... the doctor's voice calm and soothing.

She felt so strange. The feverish ache and soreness in her body had finally gone away, leaving... nothing... almost an eerie void of sensation. Her mind seemed to be quietly floating, detached from her tired, sickly body.

-----

As Megumi left to go to her room, her words reminded Kenshin of Yahiko's strange behavior.

(He's been so quiet. It's so unlike him.) He then remembered what Yahiko and Sano had seen -- the Hitokiri Battousai in all his bloody perfection -- and not just once, but twice.

He quietly walked over to Yahiko who sat in a corner of the clinic's main room, staring at the floor.

(Kaoru....) By some profound miracle, Kaoru had not been repulsed by those mysterious visions of his dark past, but what about Yahiko? Kenshin took a deep, silent breath.

"Yahiko... are you all right?"

The boy was silent for a long moment. Kenshin was afraid that he wasn't going to respond at all and felt a deep pang of dread and loss. After waiting a few minutes in silence, Kenshin turned and started to walk away... then stopped when Yahiko suddenly spoke.

"Kenshin...."

He instantly turned around and said, "Yes, Yahiko?"

The boy stared at the master swordsman standing in front of him, his long red hair pulled into a high ponytail, his sakabatou ready at his waist. In a quiet, thoughtful voice, he said, "Kenshin.... do you remember the faces of the people you've killed?"

Kenshin gasped and flinched as if brutally struck. But Yahiko didn't appear angry or sickened. There was no accusation in the boy's voice, just a subdued, almost impersonal interest.

Yahiko stared up at the man that he respected most of all... the sort of man he someday hoped to be. Looking into the expression of sorrow and old anguish in those wide violet eyes, Yahiko had his answer even before Kenshin said a word.

"....yes...." He wanted to avoid Yahiko's eyes, but he repressed the urge with some effort. "Yes... I remember their faces." He hesitated briefly, then said, "I've forgotten nothing of that time in Kyoto. Nothing."

"All of them?" Yahiko's voice seemed to contain an odd combination of skepticism and awe.

Kenshin finally had to look away. "Yes... every one of them. I... owe them that much. I think... even acting as the Hitokiri Battousai... somewhere deep inside, I already knew that each life was valuable in its own way. To forget them... to let all those people blur together in a meaningless mass...." He slowly shook his head. "Each of them had family... lovers... hopes... dreams... and I took those things away from them forever. I can never forget that."

"How... how do you manage to sleep at night? How can you keep... going?" Yahiko whispered.

"Sometimes, it's not easy. Sometimes... it's the hardest thing in the world. But friendship and... love... makes the most difficult things possible... and worthwhile."

Yahiko slowly rose to his feet. He walked up to Kenshin and stared up at him. Then, to Kenshin's great surprise and relief, Yahiko gave him a small but genuine smile.

"Thank you, Himura Kenshin." The words had an odd note of formality to them. Without another word, Yahiko turned and quickly headed for Dr. Genzai's room.

As Kenshin stared after the boy, Sano quietly walked into the room and looked at his friend without saying a word. Not surprised by Sano's presence, Kenshin whispered, "You're welcome, Myojin Yahiko."

He turned to the fighter. "Sano, why...."

Sano shook his head slowly and said, "The kid asked me not to say. It's up to him to explain, if he ever wants to. But... I think you told him exactly what he wanted and needed to hear."

Kenshin blushed and said, "Maa maa... I didn't even know the question!"

Sano grinned slightly. "You didn't need to know."

As Kenshin smiled a bit wistfully, the fighter added, "You looked really scared there, for a minute."

Kenshin stared at the floor. "I was. I've told all of you about my past as the Hitokiri Battousai... but it's a very different thing to see it with your own eyes.... I was... concerned that actually seeing what happened...."

Sano stiffened a bit. "So that stuff we saw this afternoon... that really happened?"

Kenshin nodded. "Yes...." But he thought, (....except for that very last moment... that younger version of me was AWARE of me.... It's more than just a past memory....)

Unaware of Kenshin's musings, Sano said, "It was...." His voice trailed off. The best words he could come up with was 'awe-inspiring' and 'terrifying' but he suspected those were the very last words Kenshin needed to hear. Instead he shrugged carelessly and said, "Oy, we're not that easy to get rid of. You should know that by now."

Kenshin looked up at Sano and gave him a warm, gentle smile, "I'm sorry. As Master Hiko keeps telling me, I can be a terribly slow learner. But I AM learning... thanks to all of you."

Sano pounded Kenshin on the shoulder, then muttered, "Hell, I hope we don't have to go through this crap every single time...." His voice faded as he wandered off to bed.

-----

After Sano retired for the night, Kenshin picked his sakabatou and returned to the porch, leaving the front door open in case Kaoru needed him. He stared out at the garden. In the silvery moonlight, it looked beautiful... pristine... so different from the blood drenched picture from sunset. With her words, Kaoru had managed to cleanse those ugly images from his mind... temporarily, at least.

His hand drifted up to touch one of the scars on his cheek. It was no longer bleeding, but he could still remember the burning sting of steel slicing through flesh. But that physical pain was nothing compared to the inner pain those scars represented.

(Kaoru now knows where one half of the scar came from. Perhaps... perhaps it's time I tell her how I got the other scar... and tell her about... Tomoe....)

The moon, just past the full phase but still bright, seemed to bleach the color from the world, leaving it pale and white... as white as that winter's day so long ago....

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In their house, Saitoh Hajime lay in his wife's arms, their legs intertwined, his arm curled possessively about her waist. With his head pillowed on her chest -- the same chest that now bore a shallow, day-old sword cut -- he soon fell asleep to the reassuring sound of her quietly beating heart.

As she gently stroked her husband's hair, Tokio stared up through the open window at the night sky....

....and patiently waited for the inevitable.

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Sometime later, Aoshi awoke to the sound of a dull thud, followed by a thumping noise. But it wasn't just any thumping noise. He identified the sound in an instant... the sound of flesh hitting a hard surface.

He soundlessly slipped out of the bed and cautiously made his way to the main room. The front door of the clinic was open. He stared disbelievingly at the scene illuminated by the merciless gleam of moonlight.

Himura was lying in a limp heap on the floor, his long red hair blending almost perfectly with the thin trickle of blood steeping from under his head.

(But who could have possibly sneaked up on him....)

Then he saw the other person in the room and it all made a dreadful, twisted sort of sense.

Kaoru dropped the small, bloodied stone statue she was holding -- one of the decorations scattered around Dr. Genzai's home -- and picked up the heavily wrapped sword from the table. But the sword's wrappings, so carefully and securely tied by both himself and Misao, fell open at her mere touch. Now holding the black blade, she turned to face him....

....and Aoshi saw the tears streaming silently down her face and the terrible anguish in her blue eyes.

"Kaoru!? Why...?" Off to the side, he heard the sound of a door opening, but Aoshi didn't take his eyes off of Kaoru for an instant.

Kaoru's mouth opened, but what came out wasn't anything like her normal voice. Her words were low, almost guttural as she intoned, "It ends where it began. The Battousai and the Mibu's Wolf will both pay dearly for their sins against Minobe Junichi."

With those words, she brandished the black sword. Aoshi collapsed to the floor as all his wounds inflicted by that weapon suddenly seemed to explode into agony. By the time he managed to lift his head, Kaoru had disappeared into the night, leaving behind only a sprinkling of her tears.

"KAORU!!!"

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> (end of part 11) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: Even more insidious losses to come. ^\_^

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#### 4. Parts 12-14

Rurouni Kenshin - "That Which Lingers" (Parts 12-14) by Madamhydra

This story is set in my own ALTERNATE REALITY Rurouni Kenshin universe which I've called "The Nightwitch Tales" -- think of it as Rurouni Kenshin mixed with various supernatural and paranormal elements. ^ Other stories in this alternate reality are: "Night Visitor"; "All in the Family"; and "Romancing the Wolf".

It takes place after the end of the Kyoto story arc. ^ After that, all bets are off. ^ Elements of the Revenge story arc may show up in the story.

WARNING: ^ This story is "semi-dark" -- it has dark elements > (violence, profanity, etc.) but it's not a darkfic! ^ Actually, there's <br> quite a bit of romance in it.... ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ \_-

As always, C&C is greatly appreciated! ^ ^ ^ \_^

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>

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> Part 12: ^ THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL<br>

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> Text Conventions<br> ( ^ ) are character thoughts  
> / and // // represent various sorts of mental dialogue  
> \* ----- \* ----- \* ^ marks the start/end of dreams or flashbacks  
> [ ] denote visual or time notes  
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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

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"KAORU!!!" shouted Aoshi. ^ His cry was echoed by Misao who stood frozen in a doorway.

Torn between pursuing Kaoru and tending to Aoshi, she ran first to his side. ^ A quick glance told her that although he was in obvious pain, he didn't seem to have any new injuries. ^ Biting her lip, she turned to pursue Kaoru. However, she nearly fell on her face as Aoshi hastily grabbed her bedrobe.

"No, Misao! ^ You can't handle her, especially with a broken arm!"

Still trying to pull free, Misao protested, "But... but...  
Aoshi-sama! ^ I can't just let her...."

Aoshi refused to relinquish his grip on her bedrobe, which was perilously close to coming off her shoulders. ^ Shaking his head, he gasped urgently, "Misao, please! ^ It's too dangerous for you." ^

His tense plead stopped her dead. ^ She stopped struggling and sank down beside him. ^

"You said... 'please'...."

He shifted uncomfortably under her wondering gaze and refused to meet her eyes.

The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps eliminated any chance for Misao to pursue the topic further, but she swore to herself that she WOULD discuss it with him later.

Sano ran over to Kenshin's limp body and yelled, "What the hell happened!?"

Megumi peered into the wardroom and shouted, "Kaoru's gone!"  
^ Noticing Kenshin lying unconscious on the floor, she exclaimed, "Ken-san!" and dashed over to examine him.

"How is he?" Sano asked worriedly.

After a quick, but thorough examination, she said, "He has a cut and a lump on the back of his head. ^ Scalp wounds tend to bleed a lot so they always look worse than they actually are. ^ Other than that, I can't find anything else wrong."

"I don't believe it! ^ How did someone manage to sneak in here, knock out Kenshin, and grab Kaoru!?" ^ Yahiko stared around wildly.

"Don't ask me! ^ I don't know!" ^ Sano jumped to his feet and turned to run outside. ^

Misao hastily grabbed the fighter's sleeve and yanked hard in an effort to get his attention, but with Megumi, Yahiko, and Sano all talking at once, no one was paying any attention to her. ^ Finally, she shrieked at the top of her lungs.

"HEY!!! ^ LISTEN TO ME!!!"

Sano, Yahiko, and Megumi fell silent and stared at her. ^ Misao took a deep breath and said, "You don't understand what's going on!"  
^ There wasn't any mysterious intruder!"

"What? ^ Girl, you're making absolutely NO sense!" Sano snapped.

It appeared that all the shouting had managed to rouse Kenshin. ^ His quiet groan cut through the raised voices. ^ As everyone watched him with concern, he slowly opened his eyes and tried to sit up.

"Take it easy, Kenshin. ^ You took one hell of a whack on the head."  
^ Sano tried to get his friend to lie down again, but Kenshin resisted. ^ Grimacing at the throbbing pain in his skull, he whispered, "What... happened? ^ Where's Kaoru-dono?"

The ominous silence that followed was like a dagger in Kenshin's guts. ^ He stared at all of them and repeated very evenly, "Where's Kaoru-dono?"

In a flat voice, Aoshi said, "Gone."

"Gone? ^ Where?"

"I don't know."

"Who hit me?"

"It was Kaoru."

The exchange of short, emotionless words was making Yahiko's skin prickle. ^ It was like the lull before a big thunderstorm.

"What?" ^

Kenshin's voice was frighteningly soft and even. ^ However, Aoshi didn't let that rattle him. ^ He slowly rose to his feet, helped by Misao. ^ Straightening with some effort, Aoshi said quietly but firmly, "I didn't actually see what happened. ^ I heard a thud, then the sound of someone falling on the floor. ^ When I went to check, I saw you lying on the floor. ^ Kaoru was standing over you holding THAT in her hand." ^ He pointed at the small stone statue lying on the floor.

Yahiko picked up the chunk of rock and held it up for everyone to see. ^ From the fresh blood and reddish hairs stuck to the stone, it seemed pretty obvious that it was the weapon used to knock Kenshin out cold.

"Then what happened?" ^ It seemed impossible, but Kenshin's voice became even colder.

"Kaoru dropped the statue and picked up the sword."

"You're not telling me that she's been taken over by that damned cursed sword!" Sano groaned.

Aoshi nodded.

"I thought you two said you wrapped it up so no one could touch it!" ^ Sano glared accusingly at the two ninja.

"We did!" Misao protested.

"It WAS securely wrapped, but...." ^ Aoshi hesitated before continuing. ^ "But when she picked it up, it almost seemed to... unwrap itself...."

Megumi gasped and turned pale.



Yahiko snapped, "I don't get it! ^ How the hell could Kaoru get taken over by the sword if she wasn't touching or holding it when all this shit started!?"

"I don't know," said Aoshi.

Grasping at straws, Sano blurted out, "But you said yourself that you didn't see her actually hit Kenshin! ^ Maybe she just happened to pick it up after someone else...."

Both Misao and Aoshi shook their heads.

"I'm quite certain that it was Kaoru's hand that struck Kenshin."

"How so?" said Kenshin in the same terse, flat voice. ^ By now, his eyes -- normally a warm, dark violet -- looked like shards of pale purple ice and were just as cold.

Aoshi looked steadily at the others. ^ "It was the look in her eyes."

Kenshin blinked suddenly. ^

With an emotionless voice, Aoshi added, "She was perfectly aware of what she was doing... and she was crying."

Sano, Yahiko, and Megumi stared speechlessly at Aoshi. ^

Misao fell to her knees in front of Kenshin, who was still sitting on the floor. ^

"She was WEeping... I mean, the tears were just pouring down her face... and the guilt and pain in her eyes.... ^ Himura... Kaoru KNEW what was going on... she KNEW what she had just done to you... but... but it was like she just couldn't stop herself!" ^ The ninja girl hung her head, her lips quivering as she fought back the impulse to burst into tears.

Kenshin's eyes darkened as Misao's words seemed to shatter the frozen calm slowly encasing his heart and mind.

Aoshi gave Misao a quick, concerned look and said, "Kaoru picked up the sword, then left a message for you before she fled into the night."

Megumi hissed angrily, "Why didn't you try to stop her!?"

Misao jerked her head up, but Aoshi forestalled the angry retort hovering on the girl's lips. ^ "I tried to, but somehow... she did something with the sword. ^ The next thing I knew, I was on the floor barely conscious."

Sano thought, (Whatever happened, it must have hurt like hell to stop him in his tracks like that.) ^ Even Aoshi's extraordinary self-control couldn't hide the traces of pain in his face.

"You said something about a message?" Kenshin said softly as he reached out to gently grasp Misao's shoulder.

Aoshi took a deep breath and said, "Yes. She said, 'It ends where it began. The Battousai and the Mibu's Wolf will both pay dearly for their sins against Minobe Junichi.'"

"And... and it wasn't Kaoru's voice at all! It sounded completely different! It was all gravely and hollow." Misao added, wiping at her nose.

"Oh hell... that sounds bad... really bad," Sano whispered in dismay.

Yahiko muttered, "What the hell does she mean by 'It ends where it began'? Where what began?"

"I don't know the 'what', but there's no question about the 'where'," murmured Kenshin, his head bowed and his hair obscuring his eyes.

"Huh?"

Still on his knees, Kenshin whispered, "Kyoto. The dreams, the flashbacks, the memories.... It all goes back to Kyoto."

He slowly got to his feet and headed for the open front door, but stopped suddenly. Kenshin stared down at the splotches of moisture dotting the wooden floor. Crouching down, he touched a droplet. Kenshin stared blankly at the liquid on his fingers, then delicately tasted it.

(Salty.... Of course.... Kaoru's tears....)

Sano marched up behind his friend and said, "Kenshin, why are we just standing around? We've got to go looking for her...."

Kenshin closed his eyes as he struggled to maintain his calm, then he shook his head slowly.

"No, Sano. It's too dangerous for any of you to go hunting her down, especially at night. And I suspect it would be totally futile."

Aoshi said, "If she displays half the skill that Misao had when she attacked me, recklessly pursuing her in the darkness would be foolhardy at best. I wasn't exaggerating when I said that the sword apparently bestows its user with uncanny physical abilities and sword skills. At the moment, the only person capable of facing a person possessed by that sword is Himura."

"But... if she hasn't been taken over completely, maybe she'll be able to hold back...." Megumi said.

Rising to his feet and staring out into the night, Kenshin said quietly, "Perhaps... but I'm not willing to risk anyone else's life on that chance."

Sano stomped back and forth. "So we're just going to sit here and do NOTHING!? There's got to be a way to find her!"

Aoshi said in a cool voice. "Do you have any idea where to look?"

The fighter opened his mouth, then shut it abruptly.

"Exactly. ^ She could be nearly anywhere in the city by now."

Kenshin added quietly, "We don't know where she is at the moment, but I know where I'll eventually find her... waiting for me."

Yahiko muttered, "Kyoto."

"How do you know that!?" shouted Sano.

"That sword -- or whatever entity's responsible for causing all these events -- doesn't want to simply kill me. ^ It had a perfect opportunity tonight, but didn't use it. ^ This enemy wants a confrontation, but only in Kyoto. ^ Kaoru's probably long gone from this area."

"So you think that she's already on her way there."

"Yes."

"Then shouldn't we follow her? ^ What if she gets hurt? ^ A hell of a lot could happen to her along the way to Kyoto."

"I'm ... well aware of that." ^ Kenshin was totally still, unmoving.  
^

Misao muttered, "Sano... how can we follow her if we don't even know how she's planning to get to Kyoto? ^ Besides the Toukai Road, she could be taking any of a dozen different routes."

The fighter muttered, "We could ask if people have seen her...."

Aoshi said, "Do you have the time to spare for such a search, especially if she makes an effort to hide her presence?"

"We can't just sit here! ^ We've got no idea what that sword's doing to her or what it's going to make her do, damn it! ^ Kenshin...!"  
^ But Sano's voice faded as he saw the stark expression in Kenshin's face. ^ The fighter thought, (He knows... he knows all too well what could happen to Kaoru... what could be happening to her at this very moment....)

Kenshin took a slow, shuddering breath. ^ "Our only hope is that the sword has an interest in keeping Kaoru relatively unharmed and in 'good condition'."

"I hope you realize that you're talking about this goddamn sword like it's got a mind of its own!" Sano complained.

"I think that's fairly obvious by now." ^ Aoshi said coolly, "Sagara, before yesterday, the sword's influence was mostly random. ^ But as soon as it became 'aware' of Himura and Saitoh, all that changed. ^ It's as if that recognition has somehow 'awakened' whatever dark spirit is inhabiting that weapon. ^ That sword now has a definite purpose and goal."

Misao added, "Personally, I think Kaoru was anything BUT a random choice of victim. ^ Somehow, it must know what Kaoru means to Himura. ^ It's basically taken Kaoru as a hostage and bait. ^ It wants a confrontation with Himura and Saitoh in Kyoto and it's going to do whatever it takes to make sure Kenshin gets there."

Kenshin nodded. ^ "Sano, the form isn't important. ^ Whatever its shape, that thing appears to be a sentient enemy -- ^ capable of deliberate, calculated action -- and must be treated as such. ^ I can only hope that the sword will want to keep its 'hostage' in... reasonably... good shape. ^ If not...." ^ Yahiko gulped audibly as Kenshin looked away.

Sano ran his hand through his hair, then sighed. ^ In a reluctant voice, he said, "Kenshin, I hate to bring this up, but... how can you be sure? ^ What if you're wrong about this mysterious enemy wanting to keep Kaoru as a 'hostage', so to speak? ^ What if something happens to her and she doesn't make it to Kyoto?"

Megumi sputtered, "Sano!"

The fighter gave the doctor a pained, but determined look.

"No, Megumi-dono. ^ Sano is quite right to ask those questions." ^ Kenshin put his hand against the doorsill and leaned heavily. ^ In a whisper, he said, "No, I don't know if I'm right. ^ For all I know, Kaoru... Kaoru could be already lying dead in a ditch somewhere. ^ But... but my instincts tell me that this black sword possessed Kaoru deliberately for a specific purpose and that purpose involves Kaoru being in Kyoto."

Kenshin turned to look at Sano and the anguish in his violet eyes was heartbreaking to behold. ^ "Sano, I want to do something... ANYTHING, but there's very little that can be done at the moment. ^ I have no idea where Kaoru is right now. ^ I can't find her. ^ I can't follow her. ^ All I have is a meeting place and a grim promise."

Sano took a deep breath and heaved a great, exasperated sigh. ^ "Okay. ^ If we're not going to look for her, just WHAT are we going to do?"

"Meet Saitoh at the harbor at dawn and take the boat to Osaka."

"So... we hop on the boat to Osaka, then trot off to Kyoto. ^ And what do we do when we get there? ^ Sit on our hands while we wait for Kaoru to show up!?"

The red-haired swordsman shook his head sharply. ^ "No. ^ We gather as much information as we possibly can on that sword and that man Kaoru mentioned... anything which can give us a clue as to what's going on and what this... thing... wants from me."

"Do you know anything about this Minobe character?" Yahiko said.

"Not the specific person, but the family name is familiar. ^ An old Kyoto family fallen on hard times even before the civil war started. ^ I believe they were aligned with the government forces and had ties with the Shinsengumi," replied Kenshin.

"In that case, I can understand why someone might be after you, but why Saitoh? Â Weren't they on the same side?"

As Kenshin stared at the bloodstains on the floor, he murmured, "That doesn't mean anything. Â The Shinsengumi itself was rife with personal and factional rivalry. Â The Black Hat assassin, Uduo Jine was formerly a member of the Shinsengumi. Â His fellow squad members turned on him and tried to hunt him down."

Kenshin turned to Misao. Â "You need to warn Okina and the others about... what happened to Kaoru. Â Tell them to keep an eye out for her, but... to be careful and... not to approach her."

Misao nodded grimly and glanced at Aoshi. Â He gave her a sharp nod in return.

"Right, Himura. Â I'll also let Jiya know that we're coming." Â She reached out and clung briefly to Kenshin's hand. Â "We'll find her and set her free, no matter what it takes."

"Thank you, Misao."

-----

After Misao left, Megumi firmly took hold of Kenshin's arm.

"Let me tend to that scalp wound. Â You may need stitches." Â

"It's not...."

"Ken-san! Â I'm the doctor, you're the patient, so just sit down and stay still." Â She then glared at Aoshi. Â "And you need to go back to bed!"

Aoshi was too tired to even make a pretense of resisting. Â He was appallingly weak from blood loss from his battle with Misao. Â Even more unsettling, the wounds inflicted by the black sword continued to throb and ache, although only mildly. Â He barely made it back to bed before passing out. Â

As Megumi dabbed away the blood and tended to his head, Kenshin murmured, "I hope Kaoru doesn't run into any trouble...."

Sano bit his lip. Â "You're afraid she might attack anyone who tries to interfere with her getting to Kyoto."

An attempt to nod got Kenshin a mild smack from Megumi. Â He grimaced slightly and said, "Yes. Â Even worse, the sword could possibly force her to kill with little or no provocation."

"Oh hell! Â Just great. Â If Kaoru goes on some sort of crazed killing spree..., " growled Sano.

Kenshin said, "But if that sword's got its mind set on facing me in Kyoto, then hopefully, it'll decide to play things safe by staying hidden and inconspicuous until it's ready for its confrontation."

"That reminds me. Â Kenshin, what the hell happened? Â I mean, what do you remember?" asked Sano.

The redhead shrugged and said, "There isn't much to say. Â I was sitting out on the porch with the door open. Â I thought I heard Kaoru whisper my name so I walked inside to check on her... then something hit me. Â The next thing I remember was waking up on the floor."

After Megumi finished stitching the wound on Kenshin's head, she lightly touched Kenshin on the shoulder.

"Ken-san... I wish I could go with you but...."

Kenshin shook his head. Â "But you have people who need you here, especially with Dr. Genzai still away. Â It wouldn't be fair to them."

"I know... but still..., " she murmured regretfully.

"Thank you for the thought, Megumi-dono. Â We'll keep in touch and let you know what happens." Â Kenshin glanced at Sano and Yahiko. Â "We need to go back to the dojo and get packed. Â We'll return here before dawn to get Misao and Aoshi."

"That's only a hour or so away."

Kenshin shrugged. Â "We'll have plenty of opportunity to get some rest onboard the ship."

Megumi smiled wistfully as she watched them walk away, but as she returned to her own room, she couldn't help but remember what had happened the last time Kenshin had gone to Kyoto. Â

(He had nearly died from all those injuries he sustained in all those battles... and that was just over two months go. Â He's still not fully recovered. Â I'm afraid to guess what might happen THIS time.)

-----

The walk back to the dojo was accomplished in near total silence, with everyone being caught up in their own thoughts. Â Fortunately, there were no strange phenomena along the way.

As soon as Yahiko left them to go to his own room, Sano shuffled his feet and muttered, "Kenshin... I'm sorry about giving you such a hard time about...."

"You have no idea how badly I wanted to go search for Kaoru. Â Part of me wants to go chasing after her, but another part of me knows that it's a stupid and useless thing to do." Â Kenshin's shoulders shook as he whispered, "Here I am, gambling Kaoru's life and sanity on my ability to predict the behavior of a thing which may not even be human... and if I guess wrong.... Â I don't know what I'd do." Â

Clenching his fists, Kenshin looked at Sano and cried, "I feel that I'm abandoning her, but I can't think of anything else to do right now! Â What kind of idiot does that make me!?" Â His voice dropped to

a whisper again. ^

"I can't help wondering... is Kaoru expecting me to show up at any moment to rescue her? ^ And when I don't, is she going to think that I've deserted her?"

Sano shook his head. ^ "No way! ^ Kaoru knows you way better than that! ^ You're right. ^ There's no point in wasting precious time and energy running around without a clue. ^ The best thing for us to do is go to Kyoto, dig up as much information as we can on this Minobe guy, and get ready."

The fighter stuffed his hands in his pockets and mumbled, "I've got to get packed myself. ^ I'll head to Megumi's and wait for you there."

-----  
After Sano departed the dojo, Kenshin slowly made his way back to his own room and began packing. ^ In the middle of folding a spare hakama, he abruptly froze. ^ He stared down at his hands, then closed his eyes and shuddered as he remembered the sight of blood all over Kaoru's hands. ^ Had that moment been some ghastly foreshadowing of the future? ^ He desperately hoped not and pleaded silently to whatever gods might be listening. ^

(Please... give her a swift and safe journey... don't let the blood of the innocent stain her hands... not Kaoru... please....)

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> ----- <p>

Tokio gently slid out of Saitoh's arms. ^ As soon as she rose from their futon, he frowned slightly and started to stir. ^ Tokio smiled to herself. ^ A light brush of her fingers across his forehead and he subsided back into a dreamless sleep.

Slipping on a bedrobe, she drifted through the house in utter silence, finally stepping out into the moonlit garden. ^ She stood there for several minutes, listening to the soft rustle of leaves in the night breeze and thinking about Kyoto.

A small grey owl swooped down out of the dark sky and perched on a branch nearby. ^ Tokio lifted her hand and the owl hopped onto her bare wrist. ^ It stared at her, blinked twice, then started hooting very softly for a minute or so before stopping.

With a quiet sigh, Tokio gently tickled the owl's belly, causing the bird to make almost a purring sound. ^ With a graceful gesture, she tossed the owl into the air and it headed off purposefully toward the south-east on silent wings.

She returned inside the house and went to one of the back storage rooms. ^ Tokio opened a chest and removed a silk-wrapped bundle that was just about two feet long. ^ She untied the binding strings and pulled open the wrappings. ^ Moonlight glinted off of steel as she picked up one of the objects lying on the dark silk. ^ She twirled slowly it in her fingers, then returned it to the bundle.

Tokio left the storage room and began preparing for the trip to Kyoto.

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An hour before dawn, Saitoh came downstairs to see his wife dressed, packed, and ready to go. "As she set out a modest breakfast, Tokio said, "Do you think the others will join us on the boat to Kyoto?"

Saitoh sipped his tea. "Shinomori and the Weasel Girl, most likely. As for the others, who knows? But I suspect they will end up in Kyoto, one way or another."

Finishing the meal, Saitoh got to his feet. Taking advantage of the last few minutes of true privacy they were likely to have for at least the next several days, he put his arms around Tokio... and momentarily froze.

There was a brief instant of silence, then he said softly, "Ah...."

Tokio tipped her face up and gave him an innocent look.

He smiled ruefully at her. "I see that you really are... packed and prepared."

She shrugged. With a playful little smile, Tokio murmured, "Considering what happened at the clinic... well, just in case."

"I won't even bother asking you if you've stayed in practice."

"It's an useful way of occupying time when you're not home." She chuckled and took the opportunity to snuggle against him a bit. "I hope you realize that we'll be obliged to visit my family this time. They found out that you were in Kyoto only recently and they wanted to know why you didn't drop by to see them."

Saitoh winced at the mere thought of drinking tea with over ten eagle-eyed, cantankerous old harridans... and the less said about Tokio's younger female relatives, the better.

She gave him a quick hug. "Don't worry. I'll protect you."

He sighed and muttered, "Only a person like you could making dealing with your family worthwhile."

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The sun was just peeking over the horizon as Kenshin and his friends arrived at the harbor police station. Saitoh didn't miss the exceedingly grim and somber expression on all their faces -- particularly in Kenshin -- but he merely said, "You're late."

"You bastard! We've had one hell of a night!" Misao shrieked at him.

"Oh?" Saitoh lifted an inquiring eyebrow.



Kenshin said in a cold, tightly controlled voice, "Kaoru's gone.  
Â With the sword."

Saitoh blinked. Â "Hmph. Â So this time you've managed to lose both a cursed sword AND your woman at the same time. Â And how did this little catastrophe occur?"

It seemed that the policeman's sly provocation was too much for even Kenshin's exceptional self-control. Â The others tensely waited as the redhead gave Saitoh a long, bone-chilling stare before abruptly turning and stalking away toward the edge of the dock. Â Kenshin stood there and stared out at the water, leaving the others to do the explain the situation.

Tokio emerged from the police station and stood behind her husband as Aoshi, Misao, and Sano described the events of the previous night. Â When they finished, Saitoh smirked slightly and said, "So you're all now headed to Kyoto to 'rescue' her, hm?"

Sano shouted, "Don't be so damn cool about this, Saitoh! Â Don't forget, Kenshin's not the only person on this... this... THING's hit list. Â That message wasn't just meant for the Battousai, it was also meant for YOU, the goddamn Mibu's Wolf! Â And if it hadn't been for you dumping the damn sword in Kenshin's lap, maybe Kaoru wouldn't be in this mess! Â It could have easily been your own wife who's gone missing and how would you have liked THAT!?"

Saitoh's eyes narrowed for an instant, but he shrugged carelessly. Â "Hardly my fault. Â I didn't force him to keep the sword around."

"Damn you! Â You fucking well know that Kenshin would never endanger innocent people by throwing such a dangerous thing away!"

"Then it's entirely his decision, isn't it?"

"Why you...!"

Just before Sano was about to pounce on the infuriating policeman, Tokio stepped forward and said in a very polite but firm voice, "The ship will be leaving soon. Â Perhaps we should go onboard?"

Aoshi said coolly, "Sagara, we have more important things to do than to nurse you back to health if you get hurt fighting with Saitoh."

"Grrr...." Â Sano glared at the smirking policeman. Â "FINE. Â Come on, Kenshin!"

The red-haired swordsman did not immediately reply. Â He stood near the edge of the dock, staring blankly out into the harbor as he rubbed at his temple. Â As they watched, he shook his head sharply as if trying to clear it.

"Kenshin?" Â Yahiko called out worriedly. Â

Misao muttered, "Maybe that knock on the head was worse than we thought."

With their attention all focused on Kenshin, only Tokio noticed that

her husband also had an alarmingly vague and confused expression on his face -- vague and confused for him, that is. ^ Most people wouldn't have even suspected that anything was wrong, but Tokio knew her husband too well. ^ She briefly touched his arm and murmured, "Hajime?"

He blinked, then shook his head sharply before giving his wife a quick, uneasy glance.

"Is there something wrong?" she discretely asked.

Saitoh scowled slightly. ^ "For a moment there...."

In the meantime, Sano walked up behind his friend and said, "Kenshin, we need to get on the boat to Osaka!"

"Osaka....why TO Osaka...?" ^ Kenshin scanned the harbor in bewilderment as if he couldn't quite figure out what the hell he was doing there. ^ The stiff breeze from the water whipped his long red hair, still gathered in that high ponytail, into his face.

Misao and Aoshi exchanged decidedly worried looks.

Yahiko yelled, "Yeah, to Kyoto! ^ Remember, we're going to Osaka so we can get to Kyoto and find Kaoru?"

Kenshin turned and stared at them with an aloof, if mildly confused, look in his pale violet eyes. ^ In a perfectly calm and coherent voice, he asked a very simple question.

"Kaoru? ^ Who's Kaoru?"

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> (end of part 12) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: ^ Things definitely start getting 'edgy'! ^ ^ =^\_ ^=

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>

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> Part 13: ^ REMINDERS<br>

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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, late summer]

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Yahiko yelled, "Yeah, to Kyoto! ^ Don't you remember!? ^ We're going to Osaka so we can get to Kyoto and find Kaoru!"

Kenshin turned and stared at them with a cool, if mildly confused, look in his pale violet eyes. ^ In a perfectly calm and coherent voice, he asked a very simple question.

"Kaoru?    Who's Kaoru?"

-----

He might have sounded detached and calm... but he was certainly feeling otherwise.    He kept his emotional turmoil from showing only by sheer willpower... but then again, by this time, he'd had plenty of practice.

(Kaoru....)

He rolled the name around in his mind.    He couldn't consciously recall anyone by that name... and yet, another part of him knew it very well.    The person and the memories associated with that name were desperately important to him.    He knew that for a certainty.    But why and how... there were simply NO details.   

His memories were crystal clear up to a certain point... and after that, they seemed to lose all sense or coherency, like leaves blowing in the wind.    He could catch glimpses... fragments, but the whole picture utterly refused to come together.

He glanced at the other people who stood on the dock, staring worriedly at him.    He couldn't remember their names, but they were familiar to him.    He knew how he felt about them.    The tall young man dressed in white pants and jacket... the young boy in yellow and brown... they were his friends.    He trusted them with his life.    Behind them stood a teenage girl dressed in a rather skimpy blue outfit.    He liked her.    She was trustworthy... to a certain extent.   

His eyes narrowed warily as he noticed the tall man who stood next to the girl, holding a sword.    Although the man was obviously weak from injuries, it was obvious to him that the man would still make a dangerous opponent.    While he felt cautious about the tall man, there didn't seem to be any hostility against him, either.    He respected the man and, like the girl, trusted him in certain ways.

His musings were interrupted as the man in white grabbed him by the collar and hauled him into the air.

"KENSHIN!!!    What the HELL are you talking about!?    You damn well know who Kaoru is!"

"Put me down."

-----

There was no anger in Kenshin's voice, but his words were spoken in a way that made it very unwise to refuse.    Sano blinked, then slowly lowered him back to the ground.    Releasing his grip on Kenshin's clothes, the fighter took a wary step back and stared at his friend.    There was some sort of recognition in Kenshin's gaze as he looked at him, Yahiko, Misao, and Aoshi.    On some level, the swordsman knew them... but there was also painfully clear that there was much he DIDN'T remember about them.

Yahiko was nearly jumping up and down with anxiety.    "Kenshin,

c'mon, snap out of it!" Â

"Himura! Â You've GOT to remember Kaoru!" Misao yelled.

Kenshin frowned, the look of confusion growing.

(Yes! Â It's like he's trying to remember....) Sano thought.

-----

The obvious worry and concern on his companions' faces echoed Kenshin's own chaotic feelings. Â Somehow, their physical presence made it much easier to remember what little he could about them. Â But Kaoru... there was joy, contentment, hope... and then there was fear... pain... loss....

It was the same sort of patterns of emotions he had experienced when Tomoe died. Â He desperately wanted to remember more about this Kaoru, but at the same time, he dreaded the pain of reopening old wounds. Â

(What am I doing here? Â I should be in Kyoto. Â What's going on!?)

His head ached. Â Reaching up, he felt a painful lump. Â He had been struck on the head, but it didn't seem that serious. Â It certainly didn't feel severe enough to scramble his memories so badly. Â Â

"Where am I?" he asked softly.

Sano took a very deep breath and said, "The Tokyo city harbor."

"Tokyo?" Â The name felt both familiar and unfamiliar to him.

Aoshi said quietly, "Tokyo's the new name for Edo."

As recognition dawned in Kenshin's eyes, Sano thought, (Hold it... if he doesn't recognize the new name for the city of Edo, that means that he's lost nearly a decade of memories... which means that I'm not talking to Himura Kenshin... I'm probably talking to Himura Battousai! Â Oh shit! Â I'm lucky he didn't pound me into the ground for grabbing at him! Â But... that could be a good sign. Â On some level, at least, he DOES recognize me as a friend.)

The fighter scowled. Â There was something he forgot... something very important about the fact that Kenshin's memories had apparently reverted to the time where he'd been Himura Battousai.

(What is it...?) Â Both Sano and Aoshi abruptly stiffened as they simultaneously remembered one very important fact -- they weren't the only people standing on this particular dock. Â There were two other people nearby and one of them was....

"SHIT!!!" yelled Sano as he smacked himself on the forehead.

But it was too late. Â Kenshin suddenly crouched and froze, his hand automatically going for his sword.

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As he struggled to make sense of the scattered fragments of his memories, he glanced around the area, seeking anything else that could give him some clues to his current predicament.

And in the tall, lean man with the cynical smile and narrow amber eyes... he found it. ^ The man might have cut his hair... he might be wearing something other than the familiar pale blue uniform... but the Battousai would never forget his most formidable opponent.

"Saitoh."

-----

The captain of the third troop of the Shinsengumi turned as someone said his name.

A mocking smile appeared on his lips as he murmured, "Battousai. ^ Imagine running into you here."

"Are you responsible for what's happened to me?"

Saitoh snorted and said, "I have no idea what you're babbling about, but you won't have to worry about it for too long," as he leisurely drew his sword.

-----

Sano bellowed, "Saitoh, what the hell are you doing!?"

The policeman glanced briefly at the fighter and frowned slightly before returning his full attention to Kenshin... or rather, the Battousai.

Misao whispered in an appalled voice, "I... I don't think he recognized you...."

"Oh shit... not BOTH of them," muttered Yahiko.

Tokio swiftly stepped to her husband's side and grabbed his right arm as she whispered urgently into his ear. ^

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"Hajime! ^ Listen to me. ^ Remember who you truly are. ^ This isn't Kyoto. ^ You are no longer a captain of the Shinsengumi. ^ Himura is no longer Ishin Shishi. ^ Those times have long passed."

While still keeping a cautious eye on the Battousai, Saitoh glanced at the woman staring up at him with dark brown eyes. ^ The face was more mature than he remembered -- and even more beautiful, if that was possible -- but the eyes were the same. ^ Even as a teenager, she'd had those unforgettable eyes... the gentle, teasing eyes that saw things in him that no other person ever had... the eyes of the girl... no, the WOMAN that made him feel... whole. ^

Her words and her gaze were like a swift breeze shredding the mental fog that had been clouding his mind for the last several minutes. Â For a brief instant, he HAD thought he was back in the streets of Kyoto, facing off against the Hitokiri Battousai... and swore silently at himself.

(Hell, not again!)

-----  
Sano, Yahiko, and Misao heaved sighs of relief when Saitoh gradually began to lower his sword as Tokio continued to talk to him.

In a flat voice, Kenshin said, "Get out of the way, woman," as he stared at Tokio with icy, pale eyes. Â

Misao gasped quietly. Â This was definitely the Hitokiri Battousai, the lethal swordmaster assassin she'd seen in the dream with Aoshi. Â She had no doubts whatsoever that he would go THROUGH Tokio to get to Saitoh, if necessary.

Saitoh's eyes narrowed hostilely at the Battousai's unmistakable threat. Â He started to lift his sword again when Tokio gently touched his arm and shook her head. Â Turning to face Kenshin, she stepped in front of her husband and said quietly, "Himura-san, I have something to give you."

Kenshin tensed slightly as she slowly reached into her sleeve. Â He had no idea what she might be pulling out. Â It could easily be a weapon such as a shuriken or a throwing dart. Â It had occurred before.

With slow, graceful movements, Tokio removed her closed hand from her sleeve and held it up in plain sight. Â She then gradually opened her hand....

....and a blue ribbon spilled from her fingers. Â

It didn't look like much -- a simple strip of dark blue, watered silk which fluttered in the stiff breeze off the harbor -- but Kenshin was utterly mesmerized by the sight.

....and the memories of the past ten years returned in a rush and fell into their rightful places with a thud....

Tokio said nothing. Â She simply stood still, Kaoru's favorite hair ribbon trailing from her slim fingers. Â

"Kaoru...", Kenshin whispered in a choked voice. Â That ribbon had been his very first gift to her... a replacement for the ribbon stained and ruined during his battle with Udou Jine, the Black Hat assassin. Â It was the same ribbon she'd been wearing last night as she was tucked into bed... practically last time he saw her.

Tokio quietly approached Kenshin and reached out to touch his unresisting arm. Â As she gently wound the blue silk around the wrist of his sword hand, she said, "I accidentally put this in my pocket last night. Â I was planning to return this to Kaoru the next time I saw her... but I think it would be better if you gave it back to her

yourself. "And... perhaps it will help you remember what you're truly fighting for."

"Thank you... very much... Tokio-dono," said Kenshin, his head bowed.

She gave him a gracious nod in return, then returned to her husband's side.

Kenshin gently stroked the blue silk wrapped around his right wrist, then glanced at his friends who all heaved a deep sigh of relief as they saw the clear recognition in his eyes... even Aoshi.

As he looked at them, he mentally recited their names. " (Sano... Yahiko... Misao... Aoshi....) " All the memories were there, neatly in their proper place.

"Hmph. " If you're coming, you'd better hurry up and get onboard now," snapped Saitoh as he sheathed his sword.

Kenshin gave the policeman a cool glance and got an equally cool one in return. " Saitoh stalked off toward the ship without another word, Tokio easily keeping pace a few steps behind him.

"Kenshin?" Sano asked.

The red-haired swordsman nodded grimly. "Come on. " We'll... talk... once the ship is underway."

-----

As the steamship left the harbor and headed out to sea, Kenshin and his companions found an isolated spot and settled down to discuss the incident at the dock.

"Kenshin... what just happened to you?" Sano asked.

"I... don't know. " I could clearly remember everything that happened in Kyoto over ten years ago, but everything since then... the memories were there, but disjointed... scattered. " I knew all of you... but not clearly. " And...."

Misao said, "And... Kaoru?"

Kenshin was silent for a few moments. " Finally, he whispered, "I knew there was someone... very important to me... someone I couldn't remember.... " You were right there in front of me. " I could match bits of memories to the image of specific people... but... but Kaoru wasn't there."

"And then you saw Saitoh," muttered Yahiko.

Kenshin sighed quietly. " Yes. " When I saw him... old memories and old habits took over. " If it hadn't been for his wife...." " As his voice trailed off, his gaze returned to the blue silk ribbon that Tokio had so carefully put around his wrist.

Misao said quietly, "Kenshin, you weren't the only one who somehow... forgot things."

"What do you mean?"

Sano growled, "I mean I'm pretty sure Saitoh had a flashback of his own. Â I mean, he looked right at us, but I don't think he recognized us."

Leaning against a nearby wall, Aoshi said, "Don't forget about his little memory lapse yesterday evening."

Kenshin cocked his head slightly. Â "When did this happen? Â I wasn't aware...."

"This happened right after that... vision thing we all experienced at the clinic... you know, how you got part of your scar," said Sano.

The redhead's hand unconsciously drifted up to his left cheek.

"You were really out of it so you wouldn't have noticed, but Saitoh made some really weird comment to his wife about being acquainted for only a few days. Â That must have thrown the lady for a real loop!"

"Yeah! Â But Saitoh snapped out of it as soon as she reminded him that they'd known each other for nearly fifteen years and been married for eight years," added Yahiko.

"Fifteen years.... he must have known her in Kyoto...," Kenshin murmured thoughtfully.

"I guess so."

Aoshi said, "That's probably why she managed to talk him out of attacking. Â Even if he'd had a memory slip similar to Himura's, he would still remember her clearly."

Yahiko said angrily, "All these weird dreams and images from Kyoto... Shinsengumi ghosts prowling around in that city... both Saitoh and you forgetting nearly everything after the Bakamatsu no Douran.... Â Aw hell, it's like the past is coming back to life!"

The boy abruptly stopped as everyone suddenly stared at him. Â A long silence followed.

-----

In their own cabin, Saitoh was leaning against the wall. Â He glanced at his wife and said in a detached voice, "How did you know?"

"Hm?" she murmured absently.

"How did you that I was... caught up in my memories of the past?"

Tokio stopped unpacking and sat down on the bunk. Â With a gentle smile, she said, "There was a certain... glint in your eye that I remember from those days back in Kyoto."

"Really?" Â Saitoh sounded a bit startled.



She chuckled quietly. "Oh yes. I remember everything little about you... even back then."

He walked over to his wife and lifted her chin. Staring down at Tokio, he asked with mock severity, "So... are you saying that I've lost a bit of my fire since then, hm?"

"On the contrary. You've lost nothing over the years, my husband. You've just become more patient... and more cunning as time passes." And the twinkle of laughter in her eyes seemed to indicate that she didn't mind the change at all.

-----

In Kyoto, at the Aoiya restaurant, Okina and the others were struggling to make heads or tails of Misao's most recent message from Tokyo. The message had been so long and involved that it had taken two carrier pigeons to carry.

Shiro asked, "What does she say?"

Okina frowned. "Misao says that they'll be leaving Tokyo by first available ship. Shiro, check to see when it's due to arrive in Osaka." As the Oniwabanshuu nodded, the old man continued, "She also says that Kaoru is... is...." He reread the code group several times just to make sure.

"What happened to Kaoru-san!?" Omasu said worriedly.

"Misao said that Kaoru has been apparently been... possessed."

"WHAT!?" shouted the four other ninjas.

"And that she's on her way here to Kyoto. We're to watch for her, but under no circumstances to approach or contact her. Misao also wants us to dig up any information we can on a man called Junichi Minobe."

Okina glanced around somberly at his subordinates. "Well, don't just sit around! Get moving!"

-----

"Uh, guys.... Uh... was it something I said?" Yahiko muttered as his eyes shifted uneasily.

A pale-faced Kenshin whispered, "That may be exactly what's happening. If that black sword's vengeance involves something that happened during the civil war, it may be that the sword -- or the entity controlling the sword -- isn't content to just force me to return to the place where I supposedly committed this... 'sin' against Minobe Junichi...."

"But also to return you to the TIME of that 'sin'," said Aoshi. "And not just you, but Saitoh as well." " " " " "

"Then... then.... Himura! If you go to Kyoto, whatever's happening to you guys is probably only going to get worse!" Misao shouted.

"I know. ^ But I don't have a choice." ^ Kenshin's grip tightened on his sakabatou. ^ "And even if Kaoru wasn't involved, I... would still have to go...."

"Why!?" she sputtered in confusion.

Aoshi said sharply, "Because it's very unlikely that these manifestations will just stop on their own. ^ Whatever this enemy is, it won't be satisfied until Himura and Saitoh return to Kyoto to confront it."

Kenshin's bangs shaded his eyes from view as he said quietly. ^ "Yes. ^ I know this. ^ Saitoh knows this. ^ And we both know that whatever's happening in Kyoto must be stopped at any cost."

"Saitoh?" ^ Misao blinked, then said, "Of course. ^ That 'Aku Soku Zan' thing of his."

The red-haired swordsman mutely nodded.

"Well, Saitoh might be an evil, psycho bastard, but I've got to admit he's got dedication," Sano muttered reluctantly.

Yahiko stared at the deck. ^ "But... is it really that dangerous? ^ I mean... ghosts and illusions can't really hurt people if...if you don't pay attention to them, right? ^ I mean, they're not real... things...." ^ However, his voice trailed off uneasily as he remembered Kenshin's scar bleeding and the bloodstains on the swordsman's hakama after the vision at the clinic.

Misao and Aoshi exchanged uneasy glances.

"Ghosts and undead spirits are very real. ^ They can do a lot more than just startle and scare, boy. ^ In certain situations, they can wound and even kill," said a familiar, cynical male voice from overhead.

They all turned to stare at Saitoh who was hanging over the rail on the deck above them.

"That... sounds like the voice of experience," said Aoshi.  
^ "First-hand experience."

Saitoh shrugged away the unspoken question and walked away.

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> (end of part 13) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: ^ A leisurely cruise and plenty of conversation. ^ ^\_^

=====

> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>

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> Part 14:    ON A SLOW BOAT TO OSAKA<br>

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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, summer]

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Sano soon realized that there were both good things and bad things about boat travel.    The good thing was that it was really easy.    You didn't have to do a damn thing.    The bad thing was that boat travel was boring as hell.    Except for some casual gambling games, there wasn't anything to do.    That gave Sano and his traveling companions way too much time to think... and worry.

The fighter was especially concerned about Kenshin.    Sano and the others had developed an unspoken policy of never leaving their friend totally alone even as they tried their best to give him as much privacy that they could.    Of course Kenshin was aware of what they were doing, but he didn't say anything.

The red-haired swordsman spent most of his time staring out over the water, the very picture of patience.    Sano would often see Kenshin tenderly fingering the blue silk wrapped around his right wrist.    The fighter knew what that meant -- his friend was thinking about Kaoru.

-----

After lunch on the second day, Sano was up on deck.    He was doing nothing in particular when he caught sight of Tokio standing by the deck rail.    Sano stepped back into the shadow of the deck house and silently watched her as she smiled at the gulls as they swooped and squabbled over bits of food.

One of the gulls landed on the railing a few feet away from Tokio.    It cocked its head and stared at her, then hopped closer.    Finally, after a moment or two, it pecked audaciously at her kimono sleeve.   

Tokio turned at the tug on her arm, then chuckled softly.    The sea gull started to squawk enthusiastically at her, hopping from foot to foot.

Sano jumped as someone jabbed an elbow into his ribs.

"Hey!    I don't think the psycho cop's going to be happy if he catches you ogling his wife.    And what about poor Megumi, huh?" hissed Misao, her eyes bright with mischief.

The fighter turned bright red with embarrassment.    Waving his hands in denial, he blurted, "No!    You've got it all wrong!    I wasn't doing that!"

In a skeptical voice, she said, "Really?    Then WHAT are you doing?    You've been staring at her constantly!"

Sano raked his hand through his hair, rumpling it even more and

mumbled, "I admit she's a good looking woman...."

"Beautiful, you mean," Misao muttered back.

"Yeah... but that's not why I keep thinking about her."

"Oh?"

"I just don't understand how a woman... especially one as... as... ladylike as Tokio could stand being married to a guy like Saitoh. ^ The man barely looks at her, has hardly a kind word to say to her, doesn't seem to care that he nearly pinned her to the wall like a damn bug...."

Instead of agreeing with him, Sano was astonished to see a thoughtful, almost envious look on Misao's face.

"Hey, Weasel girl?"

She barely reacted to the insult as she thought about yesterday evening and that brief exchange of touches she'd seen between Saitoh and his wife. ^ She turned to him and said quietly, but with total confidence, "Because he loves her."

Sano stared at her blankly, then sputtered, "What!?"

"You wondered how she could stand being married to Saitoh. ^ He loves her. ^ She loves him. ^ It's all so simple."

"You're kidding! ^ I think you've got romance on the brain, girl! ^ That's ridiculous! ^ Saitoh in love. ^ HA!!!"

She scowled. ^ "I might've agreed with you, except... last night, I saw them talking in the back after Saitoh had that weird memory slip...."

"You mean like the one Kenshin had on the dock."

"Right. ^ Anyway, I caught a peek at them." ^ She sighed wistfully. ^ "They were so... so together. ^ I can't explain it any better. ^ It makes me sort of jealous...." ^ Misao then perked up. ^ "But it also gives me hope. ^ After all, if Saitoh can fall in love like that, then certainly Aoshi-sama can!"

Sano was wondering when Shinomori was going to show up in Misao's conversation. ^ The guy always did, sooner or later.

"Let me guess. ^ You're wandering around the ship looking for him, right?"

"No matter how he tries to hide it, he's still in pretty bad shape." ^ Misao shrugged carelessly, but Sano saw the raw pain and guilt in her eyes. ^ "I really hurt him, Sano." ^ Her lips quivered. ^ "I nearly killed him. ^ If I hadn't run into you guys on the trail, he could have bled to death before I got back with some help."

"Nah, he's tough, girl. ^ He wouldn't have...."

"He wouldn't have said what he did to me if he didn't think he was going to die!"

Sano took a few seconds to puzzle through Misao's tangled words.  
"With a curious look, he said, "Uh... just what did he say to you?"

She simultaneously blushed and sniffled. "He said he... cared about me."

"Hell, he's always cared about you. Any idiot could see that!"

Misao glared at him furiously. "It wasn't that sort of 'care', you jerk! He smiled at me... I mean, REALLY smiled at me!"

Sano blinked. "O-kay...."

"Oh hell! Why am I trying to explain this to you? I don't think you'd recognize love if it jumped up and bit you in the butt!"

"Now wait a minute here! Leave Megumi out of all this!"

"Megumi? Did I say anything about Megumi?" She gave him a mock innocent look.

"Oh, shut up, brat! That's none of your business!"

Misao abruptly went very quiet. She stared down at the deck and shuffled her feet. "I... I feel so responsible for getting you guys caught up in this whole stupid mess. If I hadn't picked up that sword... then Kaoru and Aoshi-sama wouldn't have been hurt... and that sword wouldn't have awoken up... and Kaoru would be safe back in Tokyo... and Himura...."

Sano grabbed her shoulders and gave her a sharp shake. "Hey, stop that! It isn't your fault, okay? That sword-thing screwed around with your mind so it's to blame, not you. Things like... like curses and stuff... they don't just go away by themselves. That sword would have crossed Kenshin's path eventually. It probably would've been just a matter of time."

Misao stared up at him. "Sano, I'm really frightened. What's happening with Kaoru? What is that sword doing with her... TO her this very minute? And what's going to happen to Himura when we get to Kyoto? It was scary enough when he had that memory slip in Tokyo, but what if he has one in Kyoto where the memories of the Battousai are so strong? What if he completely loses his memories of the last ten years? The Himura we know could disappear... forever!"

Sano sighed wearily. "I know that. And not to be mean, girl, but I'm sure Kenshin knows better than anyone else just what's at stake... after all, it IS his head. But... like he said, he's got no choice. It's our only hope of getting Kaoru back."

She shuddered. "I can handle a physical fight, but how can we fight something like this? Something that gets inside your head and twists it all around...."

Sano muttered, "Hell if I know. But I don't think that fighting is our real job this time around."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I think we're here to fight all right, but not physically. ^ Our job is to remind Kenshin of who and what he is now... to remind him of what he's gained since he left the Hitokiri Battousai behind all those years ago. ^ We're like his anchor to the present, especially since Kaoru isn't here. ^ But it won't be easy."

"Like that's a big surprise," Misao muttered.

"No. ^ I mean it. ^ Saitoh's a lucky bastard in this instance. ^ If I figure right, he met his wife at the very beginning of the civil war. ^ If you're correct about how he feels about her, that means it's pretty likely he'll recognize her AND believe what she tells him no matter how shaky his memory gets."

Misao groaned. ^ "But we don't have that sort of past history with Himura."

"Nope. ^ Kenshin met all of us long after the Douran. ^ That means that if he really gets trapped in his memories of the past... well... we can be shit out of luck."

"Surely Himura would have some old friends from those years in Kyoto... someone he could recognize and trust."

Sano shook his head. ^ "Recognize, maybe. ^ But trust? ^ That's the big question. ^ We're not talking about little things here. ^ Tell me, girl, how many people would YOU trust and believe if they walked up to you this minute and told you that half the stuff going on around you isn't real, that you're actually thirty years old, and that your worst enemy is now your ally?" ^

Misao sighed quietly and whispered, "If it was Aoshi-sama... yes. ^ Probably Hannya or Jiya, too." ^ She fell silent, then said, "There's one person that Himura's bound to recognize and trust."

Sano and the ninja girl looked at each other and simultaneously said, "Hiko Seijuro."

"IF we can find him... and that's a big 'if'." ^ Misao sighed, then turned to leave. ^ "Well, we can't do anything until we get to Osaka. ^ See you later. ^ I've still got to track down Aoshi-sama."

-----

Sano watched Misao head off in her search for Aoshi and shook his head ruefully. ^ (I think the poor guy's days of freedom are numbered. ^ Now that she's sure that he returns her feelings, there'll be no stopping her.)

As he rounded the corner of the deckhouse, Sano froze as he saw Saitoh leaning against the wall, cigarette in hand. ^ The fighter started to sweat nervously.

(Oh HELL! ^ Just how long has he been standing there!? ^ How much of my talk with Misao did he overhear? ^ Shit... what if he heard us

talking about his WIFE!?)

The inscrutable little smile on the policeman's lips gave Sano no clues. ^ The man didn't appear the least bit angry or upset. ^ Of course, this was Saitoh so who could tell what the guy was really thinking?

Saitoh glanced at Sano and his smile widened just a fraction. ^ That made the fighter even more nervous. ^ The policeman then pushed himself away from the wall and walked past Sano without so much as an insult or a sneer. ^

-----

Misao stepped out onto the deck and peered around. ^ Aoshi was nowhere in sight. ^ She wandered over to Tokio and said, "Excuse me...."

Tokio turned and said, "Good afternoon, Misao."

"It would be a better afternoon if I could find him," the girl muttered irritably. ^ "Where did he run off to? ^ He should be resting."

"Sorry, I haven't seen Shinomori-san today."

The sea gull on the rail eyed Misao with disapproval and let out a raucous squawk.

The girl glared at the noisy bird and tried to shoo it away. ^ It hopped aside, then gave her a sharp peck in retaliation.

"Why you...!" ^ She went for one of her throwing knives.

Tokio chuckled, scooped up the gull, and gently tossed it into the air. ^ The bird circled overhead twice, then nearly hit Misao on the head with a parting gift before it soared away with a triumphant cackle.

"You stupid BIRD!!!" Misao shrieked. ^ She slowly turned red as she realized how silly she must look, yelling insults at a brainless sea gull.

Tokio murmured, "A little exercise won't hurt Shinomori-san."

"I suppose, but...." ^ After a moment's silence, Misao glanced at Tokio. ^ "Do you think I worry too much about him?"

"Hm? ^ Oh, he undoubtedly appreciates your concern, but.... ^ If you'll forgive me for being so blunt, you shouldn't allow yourself to get carried away by guilt."

"You think I'm pestering him." ^ Misao's shoulders sagged.

"No, but I'm under the impression that Shinomori-san is a rather... reserved person by habit, if not by nature. ^ Displays of obvious emotion tend to make such people uncomfortable."

"How else am I supposed to let him know that I care about him!?"

Tokio lifted an eyebrow. "You're asking me?"

Misao muttered, "Like who else am I supposed to ask? I don't know that many people who are happily married or have experience in this sort of thing! Besides, if you managed to deal with someone like Saitoh for so long...." She abruptly clapped her hand over her mouth.

The older woman giggled at the embarrassed look on Misao's face.

"Uh... I... that is... I didn't mean to...," the ninja girl babbled in a flustered voice.

Tokio chuckled gently. "I understand. My husband is a bit... um, unique. I may not be the right person to ask for advice about male-female relationships."

"Oh." Misao's voice sounded a bit wistful.

Tokio sighed, then said, "Misao, just remember that you really should fall in love with a man as he is, not as you hope him to be. If he desires to change, that's one thing. Expecting him to change is a different matter altogether."

"Aoshi-sama can act so cold, but he's not really like that! He's kind and caring, but he keeps it buried so deep inside. I wish I could set him free so he could show people...."

The older woman stepped closer to Misao. "Set him free... or deprive him of what little protection he has from a harsh and difficult world?"

"What's THAT supposed to mean?" asked the bewildered girl.

"Oh dear. This IS difficult to explain." Tokio took a deep breath, then gave the girl a sympathetic look. "Misao dear, you're a young, exuberant girl. That's just the way you are. The problem is you have very little to hide from the world while Shinomori-san has a great deal to hide."

"To hide?"

Tokio nodded. "You see, Shinomori-san and Himura-san are men of deep feelings. But it's very dangerous for men like them to express those emotions freely, so they develop masks or personas to protect themselves. And after a while, those masks or personas take on a life of their own. It becomes very difficult, sometimes even impossible, to put these masks aside... even if they want to."

"You mean... like for Himura, the Hitokiri Battousai was a sort of... mask?"

"To handle a difficult and almost unbearable task, he developed the persona of a cold, relentless assassin. When he tried to leave that persona behind, he took on the persona of a mild-mannered wanderer."

"Oh... and Aoshi-sama...."



"I imagine that taking over as the leader of the Oniwabanshū at the age of fifteen was no easy task. ^ To maintain his authority, especially over the older ninjas, he had to appear calm, mature beyond his years, and in complete control at all times. ^ It's a habit that he's obviously retained to this day."

"Oh great!" ^ Misao rolled her eyes and slumped against the rail.  
^ "Now what do I do?"

Tokio smiled. ^ "I think you've already had a glimpse of how Shinomori-san really feels about you. ^ The question now is whether you'll be satisfied with that knowledge or do you want him to tell the entire world how he feels, too."

Misao snapped, "I don't care WHAT everyone else thinks! ^ I just want him to be... happy." ^ She sighed. ^ "So... you think I should stop pushing him so hard and back off?"

Tokio said gently, "Oh no. ^ Make sure he knows how you feel and let him know that you're aware how he feels. ^ Just don't try to force him into... uh, gushing about how much he loves you in front of an audience. ^ He won't do it." ^ She giggled. ^ "Or if he does, he'll be very, very embarrassed."

Misao attempted to picture Aoshi making some sort of passionate declaration of love in front of Jiya and the other Oniwabanshū... and burst into giggles herself.

Tokio patted the girl on the arm. ^ "I'm not saying that something like that will never happen. ^ It's simply going to take time. ^ He has to learn that it's safe to put his mask of control aside.  
^ Persistence and patience, my dear."

With a mischievous grin, Misao said, "Is that how it is with your husband? ^ You know how he feels about you, even though he never lets it show in public?"

Tokio's only reply was a soft chuckle.

-----

Aoshi found Saitoh on the stern of the ship, smoking. ^ Without turning to look at him, Saitoh said, "Hmph. ^ Managed to slip away from your keeper, eh?"

The former leader of the Oniwabanshū ignored the silken malice in Saitoh's voice. ^ Somehow, thinking of Misao as 'his keeper' didn't seem to sound all that... bad. ^ He briefly pondered the idea, then put it aside for a later moment.

"I could say the same thing to you. ^ After all, that's why you asked your wife to come along on this trip to Kyoto, isn't it. ^ You wanted her to keep an eye on you."

Saitoh said nothing, but continued to leisurely work on his cigarette. ^ Finally he said, "It's probably going to get worse.  
^ Much worse."

"Meaning?"

"It's not a matter of 'if', but a matter of 'when'. The situation in Kyoto needs to be stopped now, while it affects only a few people. If we wait, it's just going to grow in magnitude like a damned tsunami... one that liable to drown the entire city of Kyoto. Maybe more."

Aoshi glanced at Saitoh. "You seem to know a lot about this sort of thing. Not exactly what I would've expected from such a... pragmatic... person like yourself. Are you talking from personal experience?"

The policeman shrugged. "Oh, there's nothing more stubborn than the dead. They don't give up. Instead, they just grow in strength until they get what they want. That stupid sword would've happily killed half the population of Tokyo trying to locate either me or the Battousai." Saitoh turned to Aoshi and gave him a sly look. "So I'm rather glad that Weasel Girl and that Kaoru female ran into that sword before too many people died."

"You can hardly expect me or Himura to agree with you about that."

Saitoh snorted. "Don't tell me you think the brat's delicate. She'll recover from the experience. Besides, if Weasel Girl wants to hang around with you, she's going to need toughening. She's much too sheltered."

Aoshi glared at him and snapped. "Really? And what about your wife? Don't you think SHE needs more 'toughening' to deal with someone like YOU?"

Saitoh stared at the younger man for a second or two, then flung his head back and burst into loud, hearty laughter.

"Hahahaha! Tokio... toughening? Hahahaha!!!"

Aoshi gave Saitoh a startled look. It took a minute or two before the policeman eventually subsided into quiet chuckles.

Looking over Aoshi's shoulder, Saitoh chucked his cigarette overboard and said in a terribly amused voice, "Shinomori here was worried about you. He seems to think you're too delicate and fragile to be my wife."

The former leader of the Oniwabanshuu turned with a start, surprised that he had totally missed Tokio's approach. She stood several feet away, looking as serene as ever. With a faint sense of embarrassment, he said sharply, "Now wait a moment. I did NOT say anything of the sort...."

Saitoh smirked evilly. "No, but that's what you were implying, wasn't it?"

Tokio blinked once at her husband's words, then gave Aoshi a polite bow.

"Thank you for your concern, Shinomori-san, but I've always been in the most robust of health." She hesitated slightly, then murmured,

"Misao's looking for you."

Aoshi gave Tokio a polite nod, then glared at Saitoh one more time before stalking away from the stern.

Tokio glanced at her husband and said mildly, "You were teasing him."

Saitoh smiled slowly, but said nothing for the moment. "They stood at the railing and watched the foaming water pass by."

"Minobe Junichi. "What an idiot."

Tokio murmured, "If it wasn't for Minobe, we wouldn't have had the opportunity to know each other better."

"Hmph. "Perhaps he did me a favor, but he's still an idiot. "Or was an idiot."

"Do you know if he's alive or dead?"

"He disappeared after he was crippled during that bridge fiasco with the Battousai. "Whether he's alive or dead, who knows? "I hope my men will have some information by the time we reach Osaka."

Tokio said thoughtfully. "Something must have happened recently. "The murders associated with that black sword didn't start until just over a week ago."

"I know. "Something happened to trigger this chain of events. "But what? "And what are we going to do about it?" "He scowled thoughtfully. "Tokio, do you know someone in Kyoto who's an expert on the occult?"

"My great-aunt Asuko...."

Saitoh grimaced. "

"She keeps an extensive library. "And I'm sure she knows other knowledgeable people in Kyoto."

"Well, that settles it. "I suppose we'll end up staying with your family while we're in the city." "Saitoh didn't seem at all happy with the prospect. "Don't look so damn pleased about it," he muttered.

His wife merely gave him a placid little smile.

As he stared over the water, he said somberly, "Tokio."

"Yes, Hajime?"

"The important thing here is my duty to halt whatever that sword's doing in Kyoto. "The manifestations and apparitions have to stop before they get any worse. "The last thing I want is have the city plunged into chaos just because of some idiot's personal desire for revenge."

Tokio nodded quietly.

"If that point slips my mind for any reason -- especially memories of the past or the Battousai -- remind me of it. ^ By whatever means necessary."

"As you wish, my husband."

-----

Yahiko was on deck, practicing. ^ Normally, someone wielding a shinai would have attracted curious observers, but something about the boy's intensity and fierce concentration made people uneasy. ^ They left him alone.

Yahiko finished the last series of strokes, then took a deep breath. ^ He turned and jumped a bit to see Kenshin silently watching him. ^ The boy was relieved to note that Kenshin had returned to tying his hair back at the nape of the neck like he usually did.

The swordsman smiled slightly. ^ "You've been practicing almost constantly since we've been onboard."

Yahiko shrugged. ^ "Well, it's not like there's too much for me to do. ^ Sano usually finds a gambling game or something. ^ Misao's always bugging Aoshi. ^ And you're crazy if you think I want to hang around Saitoh!"

Kenshin sighed. ^ "I'm sorry for ignoring you...."

The boy glared at him. ^ "Don't give me that! ^ You've got a hell of a lot to worry about. ^ I don't need a baby-sitter, okay?" ^ Yahiko noticed Kenshin absently stroking the blue ribbon wrapped around his wrist.

"Uh... Kenshin?"

"Yes?"

Yahiko struggled to find a tactful way to ask, but soon gave up. ^ He bluntly said, "How are YOU doing? ^ I mean, how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine for the moment, but...."

"Yeah?"

"If I let my thoughts wander, I tend to find myself thinking about those years in Kyoto...."

"Kenshin...." ^ Yahiko couldn't hide a twitch of alarm.

The redhead looked at the worried boy. ^ (He's the future... the promise of things to come, of a time free of the death and violence that ruled in years gone by. ^ So many lives were lost trying to give birth to a new future. ^ I won't allow Kyoto to drown in blood and darkness again.) ^ His gaze drifted down to the brilliant swatch of blue silk on his wrist.

(Kaoru.... ^ I almost wish that I'd never met you. ^ You would've been safe... content. ^ If I'd had any idea of the dangers I'd put you in... the pain I'd cause you... I would have taken you home after

your first run-in with Goheh and left, never to see you again. ^ And when you asked me to stay, I should have known better... but I was tired... and lonely. ^ If I could do it all over again....)

(Turning back time.... ^ That's what this is all about, isn't it? ^ My enemy's turning back time just so he... it... can relive a moment of the past. ^ But that's not right. ^ No matter how wrong, no matter how painful, the past is just that... the past. ^ You learn from the past, make the most of the present, and live for the future. ^ That's what both Saitoh and I are both doing, in our own very different ways... trying to build a better future.)

(I almost wish that I'd never met you, Kaoru... but I'm so glad I did. ^ I'm sorry that I never told you what you meant to me while I had the chance. ^ And now this enemy is trying to make me forget you... forget that you ever existed. ^ I won't let that happen. ^ Because if I forget you, that makes everything you've endured to keep us together totally worthless... meaningless. ^ I promised that I wouldn't leave you. ^ And I won't.)

He lifted his dark violet eyes and glanced at Yahiko.

"Uh... what is it, Kenshin?"

The boy was startled to see a sad, yet beautiful smile appear on Kenshin's face.

"I was just thinking of a promise I made to Kaoru."

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In the late evening, three days after leaving Tokyo, the steamship entered Osaka harbor.

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> (end of part 14) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: ^ ^ A chance to meet a group of people capable of intimidating Saitoh... his in-laws! ^ =^\_ ^=

Never fear! ^ I'm continuing work on this story, but the rate of posting will decrease a bit. ^ I need to work on the next part of my Final Fantasy VII story CONFLICTS OF INTEREST before I get lynched by some of my more impatient readers. ^ ^ ^\_~;;

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## 5. Parts 15-17

Rurouni Kenshin - "That Which Lingers" (Parts 15-17) by Madamhydra

This story is set in my own ALTERNATE REALITY Rurouni Kenshin universe which I've called "The Nightwitch Tales" -- think of it as Rurouni Kenshin mixed with various supernatural and paranormal elements. ^ Other stories in this alternate reality are: "Night Visitor"; "All in the Family"; and "Romancing the Wolf".

It takes place after the end of the Kyoto story arc. ^ After that, all bets are off. ^ Elements of the Revenge story arc may show up in the story.

WARNING: ^ This story is "semi-dark" -- it has dark elements > (violence, profanity, etc.) but it's not a darkfic! ^ Actually, there's <br> quite a bit of romance in it.... ^ ^ ^ ^ ^\_-

As always, C&C is greatly appreciated! ^ ^ ^\_-^

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>

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> Part 15: ^ FAMILY TIES<br>

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> Text Conventions<br> ( ^ ) are character thoughts  
> / and // // represent various sorts of mental dialogue  
> \* ----- \* ----- \* ^ marks the start/end of dreams or flashbacks  
> [ ] denote visual or time notes  
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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, summer]

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In the late evening, three days after leaving Tokyo, the steamship entered Osaka harbor. ^ As the ship pulled up to the dock, a steady, cold drizzle began to fall.

After Saitoh, Kenshin, and the others disembarked, they realized that someone was waiting for them. "Actually, there were two different people waiting for them under the shelter of a nearby porch. "Nearby, two carriages waited. "Kenshin and the others recognized the first man. "Shiro of the Oniwabanshuu looked tense, unnerved. "It was easy to see that he had bad news to tell them.

Exactly the same could be said of the policeman waiting for Saitoh. "He saluted smartly and said, "Inspector Fujita. "Here's the information that you requested. "And the Chief Inspector wanted me to fill you in on new developments." "The young officer glanced at Kenshin and the others, then hesitated.

Saitoh gave the others a bored look, then shrugged. "Go ahead."

The policeman took a deep breath. "You heard about the... the things... apparitions that have been showing up in the streets of the city."

"Yes."

"Things have gotten worse since then."

"How so?"

"There have been increasing number of reports of... of erratic behavior in the city. "People attacking other people for no rational reason. "And two nights ago, a woman reported that she unexpectedly encountered some armed men walking near her house. "She claims that one of the men physically shoved her out of the way... then vanished before her eyes."

"Hmmm."

"The next day, there was a flurry of reports about the same sort of thing... people who say they actually touched or were touched by these apparitions that mysteriously appear and vanish. "It started out with minor things like a touch or a shove, but the contacts have steadily escalated to actually serious blows or assaults."

The young policeman hesitated, then said, "Last night, a man was seriously injured. "He claimed that his attacker was a man who died over a decade ago."

As Sano and the others exchanged stunned looks, Kenshin said quietly, "You said injured. "How so?"

The policeman glanced questioningly at Saitoh, who gave him a curt nod.

"He was slashed along his leg and chest, apparently with a sword. "But it gets even worse. "Sir," he hastily added, turning back to Saitoh.

"Go on."

"Three more similar incidents have occurred since last night. "And the doctors don't think that the last two men will survive."

"And they claim the same thing?"

"Basically, yes. ^ It's either someone they already knew to be dead and/or the attacker vanishes into thin air. ^ These are the only attacks which have independent witnesses or in which the victims were able to describe what happened. ^ There may be more which have gone unreported or which are unverified for various reasons, sir."

Misao and Aoshi gave Shiro sharp looks. ^ He nodded discretely.

Yahiko glared at Saitoh and shouted, "You KNEW something like this was going to happen!"

Saitoh gave the boy an irritated stare, but shrugged it off.  
^ Turning back to the young officer, he said, "Anything else?"

The young man handed him a few sheets of paper. ^ "The information that you requested."

Saitoh took the papers and said, "Very well. ^ Wait by the carriage.  
^ We'll be leaving shortly."

As the young policeman saluted and hurried away, Saitoh quickly skimmed through the papers.

Sano said, "What the hell is that about?"

Saitoh smirked slightly. ^ "It's a report on Minobe Junichi. ^ It seems that he died just over a week ago in Tokyo. ^ For the last thirteen years, he's been a crippled invalid, tended by his sister, Junko."

Misao whispered, "The timing.... that CAN'T be just a coincidence."

Kenshin said, "And what happened to his sister?"

Saitoh smiled slowly. ^ "She's dead. ^ Suicide. ^ She threw herself off a bridge and drowned after her fiance and his entire family was massacred by a mysterious assailant. ^ The fiance's name was Uboshita Sachi."

All three of the Oniwabanshuu stiffened.

Misao thought, (Uboshita! ^ That's Jiya's old friend... he and his family were the first to die in the killing spree caused by that damned black sword!)

Kenshin said thoughtfully, "The connection's starting to become clear."

Sano muttered, "It's making no sense to ME!"

Saitoh snorted and said, "Moron. ^ Minobe Junichi's death appears to have been the trigger for this whole series of events." ^ He flicked the papers in his hand. ^ "Because it says here that Minobe Junichi owned a sword, a weapon that never left his hands even though he was hopelessly crippled. ^ After his death, the sword disappeared. ^ Now do you get it, you idiot?"



Yahiko muttered, "So... if that sword was the same black sword we saw...."

"Then his sister must have been the very first one taken over by that sword! And... and she slaughtered her fiance and his entire family... then she probably killed herself because of what she'd done," Misao said in a horrified whisper.

(Oh god... if I had succeeded in killing Aoshi... I would have done the exact same thing....) She shivered and huddled against to Aoshi, who silently put a hand on her shoulder.

"But what does he want with Kenshin!?" yelled Yahiko.

"Isn't it obvious?" purred Saitoh, giving Kenshin a look of malicious amusement. "The Battousai's the one who crippled Minobe Junichi all those years ago."

Kenshin inhaled sharply. "How do you know that?"

Saitoh shrugged carelessly. "Minobe was Shinsengumi, a swordsman in my unit."

Sano clenched his fists. "You bastard! You knew who this guy was all this time and didn't tell us!?"

"I'm telling you now."

"Why didn't you tell us earlier!?"

"What good would that have been?"

"Arghhh!" Sano was so irritated that he was at a total loss for words.

Kenshin's voice was detached, devoid of all emotion. "Describe the incident in question, Saitoh."

The former Shinsengumi captain smiled nastily. "It happened thirteen years ago almost exactly. It was early August during a rainy night... rather like tonight. Minobe, the idiot, challenged you on a bridge near the southern end of the city. During the fight, the bridge collapsed, nearly taking my entire troop with it. Is this starting to sound familiar to you?"

From the look on Kenshin's face, it definitely was. He said, "So that was Minobe. But how did he become crippled? I didn't...."

Saitoh snorted. "It could have been you. Or it could have been the falling debris from the bridge. Who knows? All that matters is that Minobe and his sister blamed you for his condition."

"Which was?"

"He was almost totally paralyzed, unable to move anything below his neck. I'm surprised that he lived for so long."

Yahiko complained, "Now wait a minute! All this explains why this

Minobe guy hates Kenshin so badly, but what does he have against YOU?"

Saitoh shrugged. "Who knows? I imagine he blames me for some perceived slight which has been magnified all out of proportion after all these years. Minobe was a conceited fool, whose arrogance far outstripped his abilities. An idiot, rather like Roosterhead," he said, glancing at Sano.

"Now wait a minute...!"

While Sano yelled and Saitoh ignored, Aoshi was having a quiet conversation of his own with Shiro. The ninja basically confirmed the young police officer's information, except for the scope. The government, either inadvertently or deliberately, had badly underestimated the number of unexplained incidents.

Finally Kenshin said, "Sano, please calm down. We have more important matters to worry about. I want to get to Kyoto as soon as possible. We also need more information about that sword... its history and its capabilities." There was no need for Kenshin to mention the most important reason to go to Kyoto.

Kaoru would be there... eventually.

Saitoh said, "Ah yes, the sword. Well, I'm going to talk to an expert as soon as we get to Kyoto." He scowled irritably. "Tag along if you like."

"Who might that be?" asked Misao, briefly turning her attention away from Shiro.

Tokio stepped forward and murmured, "My grand-aunt Asuko is very knowledgeable in history and legends, particularly those of the Kyoto area and those of the supernatural kind. And if she can't help us, then she can undoubtedly refer us to someone who can."

Sano grinned. "Oh ho! We're going to get a chance to meet some of your in-laws, eh, Saitoh? I'm looking forward to that!"

A very disconcerting smirk appeared on Saitoh's face. "Be careful what you wish for, fool."

-----

Saitoh, Tokio, Kenshin and Sano ended up in the first carriage, with Misao, Aoshi, Yahiko and Shiro taking the second. There was no conversation in the first carriage as it raced toward Kyoto. Saitoh and Kenshin were both busy with their own thoughts while Tokio looked the very picture of tranquil patience.

As for Sano, he couldn't help but remember the last time they travelled this road -- the tense, headlong rush from Kyoto to Osaka to destroy Shishio's warship and the more leisurely, triumphant return back to the unburned city.

(And now, here we go again. But this time, things are a hell of a lot messier.)

This new enemy was completely different from any opponent they'd ever

faced before... one whose hatred was so powerful that it could reach from beyond the grave and twist reality itself. ^ And in one fell swoop, the cursed sword had made Kaoru bait for a trap, a human shield, and very possibly -- the most horrifying prospect of all -- a deadly weapon against Kenshin. ^

(And Kenshin...,) Sano thought. ^ This time, his friend was facing enemies both inside and out. ^ Not only did he have to worry about the sword, Minobe, and Kaoru, but Kenshin now had to face the very real danger of losing himself in memories of the past... of returning to the feared Hitokiri Battousai in both mind and soul. ^ In comparison, the battle against Shishio seemed almost pathetically simple and straightforward.

The fighter glanced at Kenshin. ^ (All that time on the boat... I'm sure he's already thought this thing through a dozen times over. ^ But like he said, there's no choice. ^ This won't go away by itself. ^ We've got to do something before something truly terrible happens to Kaoru and the entire city of Kyoto.)

The fighter gazed out at the rapidly approaching city with a growing sense of dread.

(Kyoto... the old killing ground of both the Hitokiri Battousai and Mibu's Wolf.)

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In the second carriage, things were a bit more lively. ^ After listening to Shiro describing the events that seemed to steadily grow in both number and strangeness, Yahiko muttered, "I can't believe it. ^ How can this happen? ^ What could possibly affect not just a few people, but an entire city?"

Shiro shrugged helplessly.

"I don't know. ^ But you can feel the fear in Kyoto. ^ The temples have been packed with worshippers. ^ People are seeking out spiritualists and anyone with any pretense of occult knowledge, looking for answers or protection."

Aoshi said, "All the apparitions date from the period of the Bakamatsu no Douran?"

With a grim nod, the Oniwabanshuu muttered, "As far as we can tell."

Misao asked worriedly, "How's Jiya doing? ^ You said that he actually saw...."

"Yes. ^ Okina saw the ghost of his old friend in the Aoiya garden."

"It's going to get worse," said Aoshi.

Misao muttered, "The apparitions... they're becoming more tangible... more real as time goes on, aren't they?"

"That's what Saitoh's been hinting at all along. ^ If the cause of these events isn't stopped and destroyed, Kyoto is going to become a

bloody battleground again all over again."

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The carriages finally stopped in front of a large compound within Kyoto. ^ Sano, Misao, and Yahiko gaped at the exquisite taste and understated elegance -- unmistakable signs of a family which had plenty of old money and knew how to use it without tastelessly flaunting it. ^ Even Kenshin and Aoshi looked a bit taken aback by the sight.

"Man, Saitoh's in-laws must be loaded with cash. ^ This place makes even Yatarou's mansion look cheap!" muttered Yahiko.

Misao sputtered, "Wait a second, this is the Takagi estate!"

As Saitoh made an annoyed sound, his wife bowed slightly and said, "That's correct."

The massive doors opened and a middle-aged woman stepped out to greet them. ^ Bowing deeply, she says, "Tokio-sama! ^ I'm so happy to see you again."

Tokio smiled and graciously nodded her head. ^ "I'm glad to be back, Suzue."

"Asuko-sama has been awaiting your arrival." ^ In more restrained tones, the woman turned and said, "Good evening, Inspector Fujita."

Saitoh snorted and stalked through the gates into the compound. ^ The others trailed after him, with the exception of Shiro who headed off to the Aoiya to notify the others of their arrival. ^

As Suzue led them through the main house, Kenshin abruptly stopped at a display of rustic-looking pottery in a little nook.

"Kenshin, what's up?" ask Sano.

The swordsman stared at the artfully arranged bowls and murmured, "Those dishes look familiar...."

Suzue chuckled, "Ah! ^ Asuko-sama has a particular fondness for the works of the artist Kakunoshin Niistu. ^ That's just part of her collection."

Kenshin looked rather startled. ^ "Did you say 'Kakunoshin Niistu'?"

"Why, yes. ^ Is there something wrong?"

"Uh, no. ^ Please excuse me. ^ It's very rude for us to keep Tokio-dono's grand-aunt waiting."

As they continued on their way, Misao leaned over and whispered to Kenshin, "Isn't 'Kakunoshin Niistu'...?"

The red-haired swordsman nodded, "Yes, that's the name my master Hiko Seijuro's been using for the last several years."

"What a bizarre coincidence...."

-----  
They ended up in a large room toward the back of the large house.  
Â The room overlooked a stark rock garden. Â In the far end sat three women. Â The first woman was very old, yet she was obviously still in excellent and vigorous health. Â Her cold, steely gray eyes scanned the group with a ruthless intensity that missed nothing. Â The other two women were both younger and considerably less intimidating. Â The second woman was attractive and wore her forty-some years well. Â Her face had a cheerful smile which only brightened as she caught sight of Tokio. Â The third woman was young, perhaps in her mid-twenties, with austere facial features which made her look more striking in appearance than beautiful. Â She didn't look at them, but kept her gaze modestly downcast.

Tokio introduced the ladies to Kenshin and his companions.  
Â Gesturing to the women in order of age, she murmured, "My grand-aunt Takagi Asuko. Â My aunt Takagi Yuki. Â And this is Risako."

The old woman said in a crisp, acid voice, "So, Saitoh, you finally get up the courage to pay me a visit, eh?"

The policeman glared at Asuko and he said shortly, "I've been very busy. Â Obligatory family visits were the last thing on my mind."

"Excuses, excuses." Â Asuko's gaze turned to Kenshin and smiled slowly. Â "Come here, boy." Â At first they thought she was referring to Yahiko, then she pointed a long-nailed finger in Kenshin's direction.

The redhead obligingly approached the seated women, but Sano was startled to notice that Kenshin's hand was not so casually resting on his sword. Â He glanced at Aoshi and was even more startled to see the wary look in the man's eyes, even as the former Okashira kept his kodachi close at hand. Â And Saitoh's tension was self-evident. Â It seemed impossible but all three men -- probably the best swordsmen he'd ever met -- was treating this positively ancient old woman as if she was a potential threat.

But when Asuko's gray eyes skimmed over him, Sano felt a chill run down his spine and understood their reaction. Â The woman was SCARY.

Asuko stared at Kenshin for a moment, rather like a buyer examining a colt for sale, before turning to the young woman sitting behind her. Â "So, what do you think of him, Risako?"

The young woman briefly examined Kenshin with pale brown eyes, but said nothing.

"And what brings both the old and the new Okashiras of the Oniwabanshuu, the Mibu's Wolf AND the Hitokiri Battousai to visit a old woman at this hour?" Asuko said with a chilly smile. Â

Saitoh bared his teeth slightly and snapped, "Not my choice, certainly."

"Of course not. I know your opinion of me. I make you nervous." In response to Saitoh's sneer, Asuko said, "Only your fanatical sense of duty would bring you calling. So you must want information from me. Oh, sit down, all of you. You're spraining my neck." Once they were all seated, she snapped, "Well, spit it out. What do you want to know?"

Sano thought nervously, (God, this woman has a tongue like an ox-whip!) He fervently hoped that he wouldn't do anything to attract her attention.

Kenshin coolly said, "We're seeking information about a black katana and the Minobe family. We have reason to believe that these things are related to the strange events recently taking place in Kyoto."

"Tell me, was there a design of a dancing dog somewhere on the sword?"

A startled Misao said, "Yes, there is. It's on the hilt ornaments and the tsuba of the sword."

Asuko chuckled ominously. "Then your question is hardly a challenge. You're talking about the infamous cursed sword of the Minobe family." She glanced at her patiently waiting grand-niece and said, "Tokio, fetch the Isimara text, if you please. Risako, show her where it is."

Risako got up and bowed to the formidable Asuko. As the young woman led Tokio out the door, Asuko continued, "The dancing dog was an old crest of the Minobe family, but it has fallen out of use in the last century or so."

"Well? What else?" Saitoh said with a scowl.

"You youngsters are so impatient. Very well. The black sword was created over 400 years ago by a young woman as a gift to the man she loved, Minobe Koji. Is the name familiar to you?"

"No, it isn't," said Kenshin.

"Small wonder, considering what happened. Minobe Koji was the finest swordsman of his day and possible for more than two centuries afterward. Unfortunately for this young woman, Koji was already married to a lady whom he loved dearly. The romantic poems he sent his wife are famed to this day for their beauty and sensuality." Asuko gave Saitoh a malicious look. "Which reminds me, Saitoh. I'm still waiting for a great-grandniece or grandnephew from you. I'm not getting any younger, you know. Just what have you and Tokio been doing all this years?"

Everyone's head swivelled to see Saitoh's reaction. They could hear him slowly grinding his teeth together and it took a few seconds before the policeman gritted out, "That's none of your business. Now about this sword?"

The old woman smirked, but continued with the story. "Well, legend

has it that this young woman made a pact with a demon in an effort to win the man she so desperately loved. "First, the demon was supposed to create a weapon that would make Koji the deadliest swordsman alive. "Second, the demon was supposed to find a way to get rid of Koji's beloved wife." "Asuko shrugged. "The woman was a naive fool and careless. "She botched the wording of the pact in a spectacular fashion."

Misao whispered in a sick voice, "Oh no. "I think I can see what's coming."

Asuko chuckled nastily. "Indeed. "The demon-forged blade accomplished what the young woman wanted... just not in the way she wanted. "As soon as Koji drew the sword to examine it, he was overcome by insane hatred and bloodlust. "He turned and slaughtered his pregnant wife and their two young children. "He then nearly wiped out the entire Minobe clan before he somehow managed to kill himself. "From that day on, the black sword was known as 'Kinslayer'. "It was supposedly locked away deep within the Minobe family treasure vaults and that's the last that anyone's ever heard about it."

Aoshi spoke up for the first time. "Why wasn't the sword destroyed?"

Tokio's grand-aunt gave him a long, penetrating stare. "She pursed her lips and said, "Easier said than done. "Various people tried their best to either break or lose the sword. "They failed and usually paid a severe price for the attempt."

Saitoh snapped, "So how did this dangerous weapon end up in the hands of someone like Minobe Junichi?"

The old woman shrugged. "That I do not know. "Ask the Minobe family." "She sipped her tea and said, "Now tell me why you ask about Kinslayer."

-----

Tokio and Risako silently strolled across the estate grounds after fetching the requested text from Asuko's rooms. "They chose to take a roundabout path through one of the many gardens. "As they strolled along a dimly lit walkway, Risako said, "I just received another report. "Kamiya's due to arrive in Kyoto sometime tomorrow."

"Indeed. "She's made good time, then. "I hope that she hasn't been pushed too hard," Tokio murmured.

"No. "She's been getting sufficient rest and food. "As you predicted, Kinslayer wants her in good physical condition when she arrives."

"And her mental state?"

Risako shrugged. "She cries in her sleep a lot."

"Oh dear."

"But the protective wards you put on Kamiya are working fine."

“Kinslayer hasn't been able to tamper directly with her mind.”

"That's good. I'd prefer to resolve this situation with a minimum of mental and emotional trauma for everyone involved."

The younger woman uttered a dainty snort. "Then you have your work cut out for you. The skeins of time are rapidly being rewoven into a new design."

"I know. All this trouble from a cursed demon sword and an old woman's meddling. And the Council?"

"They said to do as you see fit. The matter of Kinslayer needs to be handled, once and for all."

"Excellent." Tokio glanced at the young woman and said, "I was somewhat surprised to see you here."

With a casual shrug, Risako said, "When I heard you were arriving in Kyoto, I decided to drop in to take a look at Father and the boy."

"He's twenty-eight years old... hardly a boy now. Is this the first time you've really seen him since he was born?"

"Yes."

Tokio was silent for a moment, then she said a bit sadly, "I regret that you gave up your chance to raise him and watch him grow up."

In a faint tone of irritation, Risako said, "I'm a Nightwitch. What would I have done with a male child, anyway?"

"Was it the fact that he was a boy... or the fact that he resembled his father so very much, even as a newborn baby?"

Risako sighed and shook her head ruefully. "I see that there's no point trying to hide anything from you, Mother."

Tokio smiled but said nothing as she watched her daughter, born from an union with one of her husband's previous mortal incarnations.

Risako murmured, "You're right. He had his father's hair and his eyes, even as a baby.... I couldn't bear to look at him, so I chose the path of vengeance instead of motherhood."

"You could have left him with me, instead of abandoning him with a peasant family."

Her daughter snapped, "There was no time. My husband's murderers would have escaped." She added indifferently, "It seemed to have turned out well enough. The peasants were poor, but kind. They had no children of their own."

"You chose well. They cherished him for the few years they had him. Did you know they called him Shinta?"



Tokio's daughter smiled wistfully. "Shinta. How appropriate. The smell of shinta blossoms always reminds me of my first meeting with his father."

"Did Seijuro notify you...?"

Risako made a faint sound of annoyance. "Yes, Hiko sent me a message about picking up the boy."

"Seijuro's encounter with Shinta wasn't a total accident. Blood tends to call to blood, my dear, especially in times of need."

"That's true enough. Anyway, the child was in good hands, so I saw no reason to interfere."

Tokio chuckled. "I believe this is the first time I've heard you say anything complimentary about Seijuro."

"Don't you dare tell Hiko that I said anything of the sort, Mother. He's insufferably arrogant as it is. And changing the boy's name to Kenshin... where does Hiko get these ridiculously romantic ideas of his?"

"The name suits him very well."

"I suppose." There was a brief pause, then Risako said softly, "Kenshin looks so much like his father now."

"Yes. Along with the red hair and violet eyes, he possesses his father's sweet and gentle temperament. But he also has many of your traits, daughter. Through you, Kenshin's inherited his grandfather's golden eyes, his ruthlessness, and his gift for killing." Tokio glanced at her daughter's eyes and noted their true amber color, no longer obscured by a minor illusion.

Far from being offended by her mother's words, Risako seemed almost pleased. "Who hasn't heard of the infamous Hitokiri Battousai? And how is Father, by the way?"

"Except for the current situation with Kinslayer, his current incarnation's doing quite well." Tokio sighed. "At this moment, Asuko's probably teasing Hajime about the lack of children."

"And when am I going to have another brother or sister, Mother?"

"Hm? Oh, soon enough. I'm thinking about twins, a boy and a girl."

As they paused to gaze at a small pond glimmering in the moonlight, Risako quietly said, "Do you think your plan will work? It's not without its risks, especially for Father. It could even be fatal."

Tokio's lips thinned briefly, giving her face a look of cold, dangerous beauty. "I am very aware of that possibility, daughter. Rest assured that I'm keeping a very close eye on Hajime. Unfortunately, the awakening of Kinslayer has forced our hand. There's no going back now. The demon must be destroyed or it will

destroy your father, my mate. ^ It's that simple."

"And we can't destroy the demon ourselves, Mother?"

"No. ^ Otherwise, I would have done it myself long ago. ^ The demon's destruction requires a man with both the power and the desire to do so. ^ It is the nature of this particular beast that no woman, not even a Nightwitch, can destroy it. ^ Hiko has the necessary power, but he doesn't have the desire or the burning need to do it. ^ Kenshin has the desire. ^ I can only hope that he also has the power. ^ My task is to give Kenshin the opportunity by luring the demon out into the open."

They finally reached the house. As her daughter turned to leave her, Tokio said gently, "Are you going to remain in Kyoto?"

Risako hesitated, then nodded. ^ "It's taken me years to get over his father's death, but I would like an opportunity to know my son a little better. ^ I was never a mother to him, but if I can do something to help him...."

Tokio cocked her head inquisitively. ^ "Are you ever going to tell him the truth?" ^

"....I don't know. ^ After all this time, it seems rather pointless."

"Well, I'll leave that up to you, my dear."

"Mother?"

Tokio turned back at the oddly hesitant tone in her daughter's voice. ^ "Yes?"

"What would... my husband think of our child?"

Tokio smiled contentedly. ^ "Oh, I think he'd be very proud of the man Himura Kenshin has become."

-----

As Kenshin and the others told Asuko all about the events in Tokyo, Yahiko edged a little further behind Sano and nervously watched Tokio's grand-aunt. ^ If a few hours earlier someone had told him that he'd be scared of an old woman in her nineties, he would have laughed in their faces. ^ But now, the idea was not at all funny. ^ He'd faced dangerous opponents before, but he'd never encountered someone like this old crone. ^ There was a frightening sense of ruthlessness about her. ^ She would be a terrible opponent and the three men sitting in front -- Saitoh, Kenshin, and Aoshi -- recognized that instantly. ^ She wasn't a physical threat, but she could do more damage than any sword with her words alone. ^ And as for deviousness and cunning.... ^

The boy thought, (Well, if this is the sort of relatives Tokio got, it's no wonder she's got no problems dealing with Saitoh!) ^

Tokio's aunt Yuki had remained silent throughout the conversation, still smiling and patiently sipping tea. ^ Now she leaned forward and

whispered something into Asuko's ear.

To their surprise, the older woman abruptly turned to Misao and said curtly, "Do you love him?" pointed her bony finger at Aoshi.

A bit startled by the woman's bluntness, the ninja girl gaped, then replied in a resolute voice, "I do."

Her steely gaze turned to Kenshin. "I don't need to ask how you feel about this Kaoru girl."

Before Kenshin could respond, Asuko said, "Then pay close attention to what I say, girl, and you too, Battousai. "Because of its demonic creation, Kinslayer's sole function is to kill and destroy, much more so than ordinary swords. "And once when a weapon like that has tasted a person's blood, it never forgets and it thirsts for more of the same. "Its hunger will never be satisfied until its victims are dead. "More importantly, from what you've told me, that weapon undoubtedly gains power over those it has injured. "Its hold on its victims will never be broken as long as the blade exists."

The blood slowly drained from both Misao's and Kenshin's faces.

Asuko glanced sharply at Misao. "Best sharpen your claws, little kitten, because if you or Himura fail to destroy Kinslayer, your precious Shinomori Aoshi and Kamiya Kaoru will most certainly die a most slow and agonizing death."

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> (end of part 15) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: "Back to the Aoiya and the return of Kaoru. " =^\_ ^=

And if you're wondering how Tokio could have a daughter who appears to be in her twenties, just remember that Tokio is a lot older than she looks. "Also, check out my other story "The Wolf and the 'Witch".

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: "A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>  
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> Part 16: "HEART TO HEART<br>  
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[the present, 11th year of the Meiji period, summer]

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Shinomori's reaction to Takagi Asuko's words was typically low-key. He had blinked once when Misao flatly stated that she loved him and he didn't so much as flinch at the old woman's warning. He had already guessed as much after his excruciating confrontation with Kinslayer the night of Kaoru's disappearance.

Kenshin's eyes glittered dangerously but said nothing as Misao jumped to her feet and said in a low, tight voice, "So how do we destroy the damn sword?"

With a faintly malicious gleam in her narrowed eyes, Asuko stared at her visitors, then shrugged. "That is the real question, isn't it? No one knows for certain."

"Do you mean you don't know!?" shouted Misao, who looked like she was ready to pounce on Asuko and throttle the old woman.

"There are certain traditional methods of destroying demon-crafted items. They might work. Then again, they might not."

Kenshin said evenly, "And those methods are?"

The old woman was totally unintimidated by the various ice cold and blazingly angry stares she was receiving. She said, "Check again with me later. I may be able to give you some suggestions." Asuko flicked her hand in a dismissive gesture, clearly indicating that the meeting was at an end.

As Misao took an angry step toward the old woman, both Kenshin and Aoshi rose to their feet to block her approach. Kenshin gave the ninja girl a slight shake of the head, warning her to back off. Turning back to Asuko, the red-haired swordsman coolly said, "Very well. Until tomorrow."

"But Himura...!" sputtered Misao. Her voice abruptly trailed off as she saw the look of frozen calm in his pale violet eyes.

"Misao, now is not the time." said Aoshi firmly. The last thing he wanted was for Misao to get into trouble by offending someone as dangerous as Asuko. The current situation was bad enough already.

-----

As they reached the gates of the Takagi family compound, they found Tokio patiently waiting. "She handed a book to Kenshin and said, 'This is the Isimara text. It's a collection of old Kyoto legends collected by a Takagi family scholar over a century ago. It contains the story of Minobe Koji and Kinslayer. There are also some other legends which you might find of interest.'"

"Thank you, Tokio-dono." "Kenshin took the book, then turned to Saitoh. He said coolly, 'I want to question the Minobe family.'"

"Junichi's aunt is the only member of the family left in Kyoto." "The policeman shrugged. 'Early tomorrow morning, then. At the Aoiya. Oversleep and I'll go without you.'"

Kenshin gave Saitoh a curt nod of agreement and led the others out into the street toward Okina's restaurant.

As soon as they were out of sight of the Takagi compound, Sano heaved a great sigh and wiped at his forehead.

"Brrrrr! That old crone... what a terror!"

Kenshin said, "She's a dangerous woman. Takagi Asuko sits like a great spider amid her web, constantly watching and gathering information." He glanced back at Misao, who was trailing behind them beside Aoshi. "Cross her and she'll make your life a misery. You'll be forced to watch your back for the rest of your days, never knowing when the weight of her vengeance will fall."

"I know, I know! But it drives me crazy that this old witch is playing games with us! She doesn't give a damn what happens to Kaoru or Aoshi-sama!"

"True. The only reasons she's helping us is because Tokio-dono asked her. And she's probably enjoying the opportunity to tease Saitoh."

Aoshi said, "The Takagi have a reputation of being a family of wealthy, if somewhat eccentric scholars and they were one of the few upper class families who did not join either side during the Bakamatsu."

"So his wife's loaded, huh? It's weird to imagine Saitoh marrying into such a rich family," said Yahiko.

Kenshin shook his head. "While Saitoh thoroughly understands the power and uses of money, it means nothing to him personally. Whatever he's done, it's never been for his own gain."

Sano glanced at his friend. (That description fits you pretty damn well too, Kenshin.)

Aloud, the fighter muttered, "Well, I never would've thought to meet someone capable of giving Saitoh a run for his money in the area of pure nastiness. But that Asuko woman... No wonder Tokio can stand being married to him. She's probably used to that sort of behavior."

-----  
At the front gate of the Takagi compound, Saitoh watched Kenshin and the others disappear down the street. ^ As he turned and headed down the walkway back to the house, he could see several young girls, ranging from three to six years old in age, peeking at him from behind a mass of shrubs.

He scowled in irritation. ^ It was already starting. ^ For some peculiar reason, he seemed to fascinate the members of the Takagi household. ^ Whenever he was in the compound, people would watch him. ^ The children and the young women were the worst. ^ Thankfully, the children were relatively well behaved. ^ Otherwise, the situation would have been absolutely intolerable. ^ ^ ^

(But the young women of this family....) ^ Saitoh grimaced slightly.  
^

Usually he was the watcher, but when Tokio's family was around, HE was the person being watched. ^

Saitoh didn't find the role reversal the least bit amusing. ^ He scowl as he stalked off to look for his wife.

-----  
Tokio had decorated this room. ^ He could tell by just looking at it. ^ Her unmistakable touch was in every detail, from the selection of the bedcovers on the futon to the arrangement of the willow twigs in the alcove. ^ As he watched his wife unpack with her customary efficiency, he said irritably, "Why can't those silly girls leave me alone?"

"Young women tend to find 'dangerous' men quite interesting, Hajime.  
^ It's not unusual."

He knew that. ^ However, in the case of the Takagi females, their interest seemed to be more academic than romantic. ^ It was understandable, considering the sorts of things the old Takagi women taught them, but it didn't make their attention any easier to bear.

Several years ago, he had been indulging in a little sword practice inside one of the walled side gardens. ^ The next thing he knew, there had been nearly 15 young women silently peering over the wall, watching him in breathless fascination.

"They're just interested in my sword technique."

Tokio couldn't quite suppress a soft giggle. ^ "But your technique is so formidable....," she said in a playful voice.

A faintly horrified look appeared on Saitoh's face. ^ "Don't tell me you've been swapping bedroom stories with your relatives...!"

She got to her feet. ^ Delicately gripping the edges of his shirt, she looked up into his face and murmured, "Do you really think I would do something like that to you? ^ You're my husband and I don't share anything about you with anybody.... ^ Not with my relatives and

not even stories." ^

As Saitoh visibly relaxed, a mischievous smile appeared on Tokio's face. ^ "That's not to say that I haven't been asked for details. ^ Repeatedly. ^ I've even been offered some rather tempting bribes."

He groaned. ^ "Oh, let me guess. ^ Asuko...."

"Well, she did offer me a 200 year old manuscript by Masaki Muro, but I managed to resist."

"That meddling old bitch." ^ A malicious little smile appeared on Saitoh's face as ^ he said, "It's a pity that Aoshi, Battousai, and that idiot Sano aren't spending the night here. ^ I'd love to see them deal with the horde of females, both young and old, lurking around this place." ^

(And I can just imagine the Weasel Girl's reaction....)

Tokio laughed softly as she smoothed the wrinkles from Saitoh's shirt and returned to unpacking. ^ Still somewhat tense and irritable from the meeting with Asuko, Saitoh was about to start rummaging through his baggage when Tokio turned around, holding matches in one hand and a pack of cigarettes in the other.

He frowned. ^ "Don't tell me I'm looking THAT stressed." ^ But he took the cigarettes and matches.

Tokio merely gave him a placid smile and murmured, "The koi pond is very relaxing in the moonlight," she murmured.

He snorted but allowed her to gently nudge him out the door.

-----

As Okina and the other Oniwabanshuu awaited their visitors' arrival, the old man thought, (Shiro said that both Aoshi and Misao were injured and that Aoshi seemed to be in particularly bad shape. ^ What happened in Tokyo? ^ And then there's that message about Kaoru....)

When the knock came, everyone rushed over to open the front door. ^

"Himura!"

"Okina-san. ^ I'd hoped to see you again, just not under these circumstances," said Kenshin with a polite bow. ^ His faint smile abruptly disappeared. ^ With a tense look, he added, "Do you have any news about Kaoru?"

Okina shook his head. ^ "Sorry, I've heard nothing. ^ I've had all the people I can spare keeping an eye on the main approaches to Kyoto, but with all that's happening in the city, it's possible she managed to slip in without our knowledge."

"Yes, of course. ^ You have other concerns, also. ^ I understand."

(So grim,) thought Okina as he observed Kenshin absently stroking an oddly familiar piece of blue silk that was wrapped around the swordsman's right wrist.

After exchanging happy, if subdued greetings with Yahiko and Sano, Okina turned to Aoshi and Misao who had been lagging slightly behind the others. "While his expression do not change, the old man was quietly appalled by their condition. " Misao's left arm was splinted and in a sling, but he was more disturbed by the shadows lurking in the girl's eyes. " And the mere fact that there was detectable signs of exhaustion and pain in Aoshi's face and posture told Okina that Aoshi was definitely hurting.

Even as these thoughts were going through Okina's mind, Aoshi wavered slightly and put his hand on the door frame to steady himself. " As Misao and nearly everyone else jumped to help him, the former Okashira shook his head sharply, then straightened up. "It's nothing."

"You need to get some rest!" Misao protested.

"What we need to do is to discuss what happened in Tokyo and what's going on in Kyoto," he said in a firm voice.

Omasu blurted out, "Misao, how did you hurt your arm!?" " At the very same time, Okina asked, "What happened, Aoshi?"

The old man and the other Oniwabanshuu were left momentarily speechless as Aoshi and Misao answered simultaneously.

"I broke it," Aoshi said flatly.

> "I tried to kill him," Misao replied in an equally flat voice.  
<p>

The two of them exchanged quick glances, then they spoke, again simultaneously.

"It wasn't her fault."

> "It wasn't his fault." <p>

Okina blinked, then took a deep breath. "Obviously, there's a lot you need to tell us about.

-----

After they all settled into one of the rooms overlooking the restaurant's courtyard garden, Misao, Kenshin and the others began to describe the ominous events in Tokyo. " Misao started out with her meeting with Saitoh's wife and the first encounter with the black sword. " She faltered as she described her nearly fatal attack on Aoshi, but grimly plowed through the ugly tale. " When she was finished, there was a long silence.

Okina thought, (Ah, Misao-chan, that explains the shame and sorrow in your eyes... and here I was thinking that you were feeling guilty only because Aoshi had been injured protecting you or something like that....)

Aoshi's version of Misao's ambush was short, concise, and



unemotional. Â Okina sensed there was a great deal that Aoshi was not saying, but he trusted the younger man's judgment that the things left unsaid were not really relevant to the matter of the black sword known as Kinslayer, the events in Kyoto, or to Kaoru's disappearance. Â

The chilling tale continued... the mysterious dreams and visions... the sword's dark powers... the flashbacks that both Saitoh and Kenshin had suffered.... Â Kenshin and the other's story would have been unbelievable under normal circumstances, but after the bizarre incidents plaguing Kyoto over the past few days, the events in Tokyo seemed perfectly plausible. Â

Over three hours after they started, Kenshin finally concluded with the information provided by Tokio's grand aunt Asuko. Â When he stopped speaking, Okina folded his hands and murmured, "So you've returned to Kyoto to find Kaoru and to destroy Kinslayer."

"Yes."

Okon whispered, "But... but it's incredible to think that everything that's happened in both Tokyo and Kyoto is being caused by a stupid chunk of metal!"

"Perhaps, but that 'chunk of metal' is apparently infused by a demon's power. Â We have no idea about the limits of that demon's power. Â It is quite possible that the unnatural phenomena occurring in Kyoto could easily spread throughout the country unless we do something to stop it," murmured Aoshi.

Misao flicked her braid over her shoulder and said to Aoshi, "You won't be able to do anything if you fall on your face from sheer exhaustion! Â You're nowhere close to recovering from your injuries!"

Kenshin rose to his feet and quietly said, "We have an early morning meeting with Saitoh and we all need to get whatever rest we can. Â We may not have that luxury later."

Sano also hauled himself to his feet, muttering, "Yeah, like when the excitement really starts." Â

"We'll see in the morning, then," said Okina.

As Kenshin, Sano, and Yahiko were led out of the room by Omasu, the other Oniwabanshuu dispersed to attend to other matters. Â Now alone with Aoshi and Misao, Okina took the opportunity observe Aoshi a bit more closely. Â Glancing at Misao, the old man casually said, "Why don't you take a bath and get something to eat?"

The girl didn't budge. Â Instead, she stared stubbornly at Okina and said evenly, "Nice try, Jiya, but you're not getting rid of me that easily. Â And you don't need to protect me from the truth, anymore. Â I can handle whatever you've got to discuss."

Okina's eyes narrowed. Â (Yes... I think she can,) he thought as he detected a grim determination in Misao that contrasted sharply with her usual bubbly personality.

He turned to Aoshi and said crisply, "How bad is it?"

"Several cuts on both legs, torso, and left shoulder, some broken ribs on the right side, a stab wound in the abdomen, and a concussion."

Misao twitched during Aoshi's dry recitation of his injuries, but otherwise managed to remain outwardly calm.

"And how are you feeling?" continued the old man.

"I've felt better, but I'll manage. ^ Dr. Takani did her usual excellent work."

"You'd best go to bed, then. ^ As Himura said, things are probably going to become very hectic very soon."

Aoshi made no protest. ^ He merely rose to his feet with less than his usual grace and headed for his room.

Misao stared after him as he departed, then quickly rose to her feet. ^ Just before she left the room, Okina said, "Misao, are you... all right?" ^

She paused at the doorway. ^ Bowing her head, she whispered, "All right? ^ After what I've done to him?" ^ Misao uttered a bitter chuckle. ^ "No, I'm not 'all right', but like Aoshi-sama said... I'll manage."

"Misao, it wasn't your fault. ^ From everything that Aoshi told me, it was the sword who made you...."

She spun around and glared at him. ^ "But you don't understand how that sword works! ^ It doesn't simply take over your mind! ^ Those murderous feelings don't just appear out of the blue! ^ That sword dug up and magnified every single angry thought that I might have had... all the resentment and frustration that I felt because of his behavior.... ^ That's what's so sickening, Jiya... finding out just how much anger and bitterness that's inside of me!"

Okina watched in silence as Misao gasped for air as she tried to regain some self-control. ^ Finally, she said, "You don't understand. ^ I really hurt him, and I'm not talking only about that sword. ^ It was what I said to him about Hannya, leaving me behind, nearly killing YOU, betraying the other Oniwabanshuu... all that! ^ And he still risked his life to save me and he could die because of it!"

Alarmed, Okina said, "But I thought Aoshi was recovering!"

Misao shook her head wearily, "Asuko said that the wounds caused by Kinslayer won't heal properly as long as the sword exists. ^ And if those wounds reopen, he could very easily die a slow and painful death."

"I... see."

She took a deep breath. ^ "That reminds me. ^ He needs his bandages changed." ^ Misao slipped out the door and headed toward the kitchen, leaving a sorely troubled Okina alone with this thoughts.

(In this past few months, she's been through so much. ^ The loss of Hannya and the others, Aoshi's slide into darkness and madness, the battle with the Juppon Gatana.... ^ At the beginning of this year, she was still a child, but now... now she's a young woman, trying to deal with harsh and painful experiences.) ^

Okina didn't know whether to be glad about her hard-won maturity she displaying or to mourn the loss of her carefree innocence.^ But she was right. ^ He and the others couldn't shield Misao from the dark side of life any more... not after her experience with Kinslayer and coming face-to-face with the darkness inside of herself.

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Alone in his bedroom, Aoshi slowly pulled off his shirt and fell back onto the futon. ^ That painful encounter with Kaoru and Kinslayer had been a definite setback to his recovery.

In his exhausted state, he failed to notice someone approaching his room. ^ Suddenly, the door slid open without so much as a warning knock. ^ As he sat up with a barely suppressed grunt of pain, Misao stepped inside carrying a tray loaded with a basin of water, some packages of medicine, and enough bandages to wrap a small army.

"What are you doing here?"

"Megumi said that your bandages needed to be changed every day," she said with slightly forced cheer.

He shook his head. ^ "There's no need for you to do that. ^ Tokio-san changed them on the boat yesterday evening. ^ Okon can attend to it tomorrow morning." ^

If she had been behaving in her usual bouncy, overenthusiastic way, he might have summoned the willpower to resist her attention and send her packing. ^ But he saw the fear in her eyes, the fear put there by Takagi Asuko's harsh warning, and realized that Misao desperately needed some reassurance about his condition. ^ She needed to see with her own eyes that his wounds were healing -- for the moment.

He sighed wearily, then backed down. ^ "But if you insist...." ^

She gave him a relieved smile, then set about organizing her supplies. ^ He watched bemusedly as Misao heaped roll after roll of bandages on the table. ^ ^ But as he eyed the growing pile with a definite air of misgiving, he murmured, "I don't think all that's necessary."

(If she gets carried away, I might end up looking like Shishio.)

"Misao, do you actually know what you're doing? ^ Why don't you just call...."

"Just let me handle it, okay?"

"But...."

Misao glared at him. "Do you have a problem with that?"

Her bravado evaporated as he hesitated a little too long. Misao bit her lip and said in a quiet, restrained voice, "I... I just wanted to...." She looked away. "But if it really bothers you, then...."

At that moment, it would have been easy to make Misao go away and leave him alone, but Aoshi couldn't forget the fear and concern in her eyes when Asuko told her that he could die from the wounds Kinslayer inflicted. He couldn't ignore the total conviction in her voice when she said that she loved him. He couldn't stand the defeat in her sagging shoulders and drooping head as she turned to leave.

And he found that he didn't WANT her to go away.

He didn't want to be left alone.

Aoshi shrugged. "Go ahead, then."

"You... you don't mind?"

"That's irrelevant. Just do it, Misao."

He was rewarded with a quick flash of a smile as she moved behind him and started to pull the old bandages loose. To his pleasant surprise, although she didn't have the experienced touch of Dr. Takani or Saitoh's wife, Misao definitely knew what she was doing.

Despite all her care, removing the bandages was not a painless operation. Occasionally a bandage would cling to the wound, forcing her to use water to soak the cloth free. Once the bandage was gone, she would dab some greenish cream from a jar on the wound and proceed to apply a fresh dressing.

"That medicine...."

Misao said, "Megumi gave it to me the night before we left Tokyo. She told me how to use it and how to change your bandages."

"Why did she do that?"

"I asked."

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"Stay still. There's just this one last bit, then I can do your ribs." Misao had her head down, concentrating on the most troubling wound -- the deep stab wound where she had plunged one of her throwing darts into the middle of his abdomen.

He endure all her earlier ministrations in stoic silence, but even Aoshi couldn't suppress a few grunts of pain as Misao did her best to wrap his chest to prevent his broken ribs from shifting.

She winced as he gasped sharply as she pulled the bandage tight. "I'm sorry! Just a little more, Aoshi-sama."

Exhausted and hurting, he wearily said, "Misao, after all we've been through, don't you think you could drop the '-sama'?"

Misao abruptly froze.

Aoshi could have imagined any number of reactions to his words, but he certainly didn't imagine the reaction he actually got. Â

"Please... don't." Â Misao slowly looked up at him, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

Aoshi stared back at her in mute confusion.

"Please... don't say things like that... just to make me feel better. Â Say it only if you really mean it."

"I... don't understand." Â

She said quietly, "The only time you ever do things like that -- letting the walls around your heart and soul down -- the only time you do that is when something bad happens to you and you think I need something to make me feel better!" Â

"Is that what I'm doing?" he said in a thoughtful voice.

"Yes, it is! Â That time when you smiled at me in the forest? Â You only did that because you thought you were going to die! Â And now you're doing to make me feel better again, only this time it's because you think that you're probably going to die from these wounds if Kinslayer isn't destroyed in time!" she said accusingly. Â

"Misao, I...."

She shook her head slowly. Â "Don't misunderstand. Â It's not that I don't want these sorts of things. Â I WANT you to smile at me. Â I WANT to call you just by your first name. Â But... but don't do those things just for me! Â Do them because you really want to! Â Because they make YOU feel better!"

Misao blinked back her tears. Â "I was doing the wrong thing by trying to force you to change... by trying to force you to take down those walls of yours before you were ready."

"Where did you get that idea?"

She looked away, then whispered, "Tokio told me that there's a very big difference between encouraging someone to change and forcing them to change."

"You spoke to Tokio-san... about me?" Â

"Yes."

At first the idea of asking Saitoh's wife for romantic advice seemed ludicrous to Aoshi, but then he thought, (But who else could she really ask? Â Certainly not Okon and Omasu, given the way they seemed to have romantic crushes on every handsome man that passed by. Â Even

if Kaoru was around, she'd know less about men than Misao. ^ Tokio's probably the only mature woman Misao knows who's familiar with men like myself or Saitoh.)

And now he was beginning to understand the subtle change in Misao's behavior over the last several days. ^ She certainly hadn't tried to avoid him. ^ On the contrary, she rarely let him out of her sight. ^ But she had apparently given up on her habit of trying all sorts of silly and annoying things in an attempt to force some sort of reaction out of him. ^ She certainly hadn't become a saint, but her restraint had definitely made the last few days much less stressful for him. ^ Instead of having to be on the constant lookout for her latest antic, he found himself gradually relaxing in Misao's presence.

(I think I need to tell her that.)

"Misao...."

She sniffled, then mumbled, "Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"Huh?"

"For caring enough to ask for advice and for following that advice, no matter how difficult. ^ I know it couldn't have been easy for you to be so patient. ^ It... means a great deal to me."

She stared at him in stunned disbelief.

Aoshi didn't smile, but he didn't need to. ^ "I'm not certain if I'm capable of living without 'walls'. ^ I doubt it. ^ But perhaps, with time and with the right teacher, I can learn to how to allow the people I... care about... within those walls."

The brilliant, beautiful smile that slowly appeared on Misao's face ^ and the joy in her bright blue eyes were a greater reward than he could have ever hoped for....

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> (end of part 16) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: ^ Kaoru and Kinslayer arrive in Kyoto! ^ ^ =^\_ ^=

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>  
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> Part 17: ^ BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS<br>  
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[ Kyoto - mid-August, 1878 (11th year of the Meiji period) ]

In their room at the Aoiya restaurant, Kenshin put his sakabatou

within easy reach and began to skim through the book Saitoh's wife had given him. ^ The text provided a much more detailed background for the story told by Tokio's grand-aunt Asuko but the old woman had told them the most important parts. ^ The text's description of Kinslayer matched perfectly with the black sword used by Misao and later stolen by Kaoru, down to the peculiar hilt ornaments.

Sano and Yahiko watched their friend with a mixture of concern and unease. ^ They both knew that Kenshin was terribly worried about Kaoru, but he was behaving calmly. ^ A bit TOO calm for their liking. ^ It was an ominous sort of stillness, just like the eerie hush in the air just before a big thunderstorm. ^ They couldn't help wondering how much of this icy self-control was from the Kenshin they knew and how much of it was from the Battousai.

Sano glanced at his friend who quietly reading with his back against the wall and uncomfortably, "Oy, Kenshin...."

"Yes?"

"You mind telling us what happened the last time you bumped into that Minobe guy?"

Kenshin put the book down and said simply, "I never knew him by name, but I do recall the incident that Saitoh described."

"The collapsing bridge thing?"

"Yes. ^ It was almost thirteen years ago to this day. ^ I was acting as a bodyguard to one of the older members of the Ishin Shishi. ^ That night, I was escorting him back from a meeting with some other members. ^ There had been some security problems recently so we were especially alert. ^ Our route took us by a bridge at the southern end of Kyoto. ^ It had been raining heavily for the last several days and the canals were nearly overflowing. ^ As we were passing by one of the bridges, five Shinsengumi swordsmen jumped out from an alleyway. ^ They were inexperienced and stupid. ^ The battle ended up taking us out onto the bridge. ^ I was about to finish off the last man when a full squad of Shinsengumi appeared on the opposite side of the canal. ^ By the time they got onto the bridge, it was starting to shake dangerously. ^ I jumped for the bank just as the bridge collapsed. ^ The Shinsengumi were caught in the middle of the bridge and they all fell into the water." ^ Kenshin shrugged slightly as if to say, 'And that was that'.

Yahiko could barely repress a shiver at the cool indifference in Kenshin's voice. ^ It was so unlike him. ^ The young boy coughed, then said tentatively, "Kenshin...?"

"Yes, Yahiko?"

"So what happened to the other guys? ^ The other Shinsengumi who showed up later? ^ The ones the fell into the canal...."

"I don't know. ^ It was an abnormally cold August and the canals were choked with debris. ^ It's likely that some, if not all, of them drowned." ^

Yahiko stared at Kenshin. ^ The swordsman's eyes were not shifted to that feral golden shade that he remembered so well from the dojo

battle with Saitoh, but Kenshin's pale violet gaze was devoid of the warmth and empathy that the boy was used to seeing.

(His voice... it's so empty. ^ He doesn't seem to care that he slaughtered four swordsmen who were probably no match for him. ^ He doesn't seem to care that an entire squad of men probably drowned right before his eyes. ^ How can he say that he cares about the people he killed when he talks like he doesn't feel a damn thing at all?) ^

But Yahiko found himself thinking back to his conversation with Kenshin a few days ago when Kenshin said, 'I think... even acting as the Hitokiri Battousai... somewhere deep inside, I already knew that each life was valuable in its own way.' ^

(I can't believe that he would lie about something about that. ^ A part of him MUST have cared. ^ But... doesn't that sort of mean a part of him DIDN'T care? ^ Is that how he managed to survive all that fighting and bloodshed in Kyoto? ^ By not caring, at least on the outside?)

As Yahiko struggled to reconcile the Battousai's apparently callous disregard for human life with the Kenshin he knew, Sano watched his friend suddenly rub his forehead and grimace slightly.

"Hey, you okay?"

Kenshin said quietly, "Yes. ^ It's just that I don't particularly enjoy thinking about what happened during the Bakamatsu." ^ He hesitated briefly. ^ "And now that I'm in Kyoto, the memories are stronger than ever. ^ They feel so vivid, so real." ^ Almost unconsciously, he rubbed at the blue hair ribbon around his right wrist as if seeking reassurance... or perhaps to remind himself of the present. ^

Sano muttered, "Great. ^ Just great. ^ And there's no telling when Kaoru will show up around here!"

Kenshin looked a bit startled. ^ "No. I'm certain that she'll appear within the next day or so."

"Why's that?" asked Yahiko.

"Minobe or his ghost has gone through all this trouble to recreate the circumstances of that night on the bridge, even going to the point of entangling the entire city of Kyoto in this waking nightmare. ^ If you following THAT reasoning, it's only appropriate that the final confrontation take place on the exact anniversary of that night on the bridge."

"Which is?"

"Bon... the Festival for the Dead. ^ August 13th." ^ Kenshin's lips curved up in a wintery smile. ^

Sano smacked himself on the head. ^ "Damn it! ^ How could I have totally missed that! ^ That's less than three days away!"

Yahiko said, "So we don't have much time...."



"Much time to do what!? Â There's not a whole hell of a lot WE can do!" snapped Sano. Â "It's all up to Kenshin." Â With a worried look, the fighter said, "Can you fight off those memories of the Battousai for that long?"

Kenshin did not immediately answer. Â Finally, in a steely voice, he said, "No matter what happens, I'm not going to forget Kaoru and what she means to me... not after all we've been through... I refuse to lose that because of some madman's hunger for revenge."

It was only later that Sano realized that Kenshin never truly answered his question about the Battousai.

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However, it seemed that memories of the bridge incident were not so easily dismissed. Â While Sano and Yahiko slept, Kenshin stared out the window at the dark sky and the rain, remembering....

And on the Takagi estate, sheltered from the cold, steady drizzle, Saitoh leaned against a tree overlooking the koi pond. Â He took a long, slow drag on his cigarette as he recalled a similar rainy night thirteen years ago.

-----

[ Kyoto - August 13th, 1865 ]

As Saitoh Hajime, the Captain of the Shinsengumi's third squad, finished discussing the evening's mission with his men, one of the newest members of his group spoke up.

"But what are you going to do about the Battousai?"

Saitoh lifted an eyebrow and said coolly, "Nothing."

"Nothing!? Â If he's causing us so much trouble, why haven't we hunted him down and exterminated him?"

"Keep your mind on the task at hand, Minobe. Â We have more important things to do tonight than chasing after Himura Battousai." Â Saitoh turned away, apparently bored with the conversation.

Matsuda, one of the more senior members of Saitoh's troop muttered, "I hope we don't run into him tonight. Â The timetable's too tight. Â If we get bogged down in an extended battle, it could jeopardize the whole plan. Â More importantly, we could lose the element of surprise."

"Are you saying that we should run away from a single man?" Minobe snapped in an outraged voice.

Saitoh shrugged. Â "True, the Shinsengumi do not flee from adversity, but it would be infinitely more convenient to avoid a confrontation with the Battousai tonight. Â There'll be plenty of opportunities for duels and challenges later on."

Minobe would not be so easily diverted. Â "Well, you might be afraid to face him, but I'm not!"

Several of Saitoh's more experienced men exchanged cynical looks and rolled their eyes at this display of reckless arrogance. "However, Saitoh chose to be amused by Minobe's rash words. "With a nasty chuckle, he said, "Oh ho. "So you think you can take on the Battousai? "Don't be an idiot."

"He can't possibly be as good as they say," sneered the young man.

"No. "He's better. "You'll be lucky to survive the first exchange of blows, Minobe. "If you want to get yourself killed, that's fine with me, but do it some other night."

Minobe flushed bright red with rage, then stormed off into a corner to sulk. "He was soon joined by several of his friends.

Saitoh turned to Matsuda and said, "I hate getting saddled with such a pack of immature idiots."

The other man shrugged and said, "You know we're a bit short-handed at the moment. "We had to accept these members of the fifth squad in order to boost our numbers. He's an excellent fighter. "Lots of talent."

Saitoh scowled. "But he has no brains and no judgment. "And a fool like that is a danger to himself and the people around him. "If the Battousai doesn't kill him, I just might end up doing it myself."

-----

Carrying an umbrella to shield himself from the steadily falling rain, a middle-aged man was being warily escorted by several swordsmen. "Just behind the man walked a very young man, a teenager really. "The lanterns along the street were just bright enough to illuminate his long, bright red hair which was caught up in a high ponytail and the crossed scars marring his left cheek.

The older man glanced soberly at the redhead and said quietly, "Himura-san...?"

"It was as we expected, Tomoboko-san," the redhead replied in a cool voice, his left hand resting easily on the hilt of his katana. "Your nephew sold the information about the meeting to one of the Shinsengumi's informants."

The older man grimaced, then said, "So what happens now?"

"He's already been taken away for interrogation."

"I see. "That explains the sudden change in the meeting's location." "He shook his head sadly.

Himura suddenly stiffened, then whirled just as five young men charged out of a nearby alleyway. "The lead swordsman yelled, "Battousai!"

His opponents were dressed in the familiar Shinsengumi uniform, but they looked raw and inexperienced compared to the other Shinsengumi

he had encountered before. ^

(New recruits looking for easy prey. ^ Idiots.)

With a sharp gesture, he sent the other bodyguards on their way with Tomoboko. ^ However, it seemed that this pack of Shinsengumi swordsmen was not hunting for ordinary Ishin Shishi blood tonight. ^

They were hunting specifically for him.

With a scowl distorting his handsome features, the lead swordsman snapped, "THIS is the fabled Hitokiri Battousai? ^ A scrawny teenager!?" ^ He snorted. ^ "My old aunt is bigger than he is!"

The Battousai cared nothing for their bravado. ^ One hand on the hilt of his katana and the other on the sheath, he coldly snapped out a single word.

"Come."

-----

Several hours after the meeting, one of Saitoh's men came running up, shouting, "Captain! ^ Something's gone wrong! ^ The Ishin Shishi were already on the alert even before we got into position!"

In the distance, Saitoh and his men could see the glare from a large fire reflecting off the heavy cloud cover. ^ With the constant rain, there was little chance of the flames spreading, but it was a bad sign, nevertheless.

"The fighting had already started," Saitoh snapped.

One of the other members in his troop shouted, "Saitoh-san! ^ If we cut across the southern canal, we can be there in a few minutes!"

As the squad ran through the increasingly heavy rain, Saitoh wondered what -- or who -- had alerted the Ishin Shishi forces. ^ He soon had his answer as the squad of swordsmen reached the edge of the canal. ^ He instantly recognized the three combatants blocking the far end of the bridge. ^ The first man was that idiot Minobe and the second was one of Minobe's equally idiotic friends.

The third man bore the unmistakable red hair of the Battousai.

(That fool Minobe! ^ His fighting's probably attracted the attention of every Ishin Shishi fighter within three blocks!) seethed Saitoh. ^ It was no wonder that the enemy were ready for attack. ^ Even now, he could see Ishin Shishi forces converging on the bridge. ^ However, he and his men had a mission to complete and the Shinsengumi would not tolerate any interference, especially from the opposition.

He glanced at his men and said, "Fight your way through and head for the designated location. ^ I'll deal with the Battousai." ^ And with those words, Saitoh and his men charged across the rain-slicked wooden bridge. ^ At that moment, one of the Battousai's opponents fell, leaving Minobe alone to face the master swordsman.

Saitoh's squad was barely halfway across when the structure shook alarmingly as the swiftly flowing water in the canal slammed a large uprooted tree into one of the bridge's main supports.

(Damn. ^ Another impact and this whole thing will collapse.) ^ He glanced upstream only to see more chunks of debris coming their way.

"Go!" shouted Saitoh at his men. ^

By this time, Minobe was undoubtedly realizing that the Battousai had more than earned his deadly reputation. ^ Saitoh snarled in a mixture of dismay and anger as a panicky swipe of Minobe's sword completely missed the Battousai and sliced deep into one of the bridge supports. ^ It was the deathblow for the structure, which had already been badly weakened by the constant pounding from the debris-filled floodwaters. ^ There was a loud crack, everything shuddered, then the whole bridge abruptly crumbled.

Saitoh caught a glimpse of the Battousai effortlessly leaping for the safety of the canal bank, just before he plunged deep into the icy churning waters. ^ As he clawed his way back to the surface, something hard slammed into the back of his head and everything abruptly went black.

The next thing Saitoh could remember was the feel of mud oozing between his fingers as someone struggled to haul him out of the torrential flow of water. ^ He lay on his stomach for a few moments, vomiting up all the water he'd swallowed, then he turned over onto his back and stared upward. ^ He instantly recognized his rescuer. ^ Muddled and exhausted, Saitoh dazedly thought that Takagi Tokio -- even though she was soaking wet and splattered all over with mud -- was quite the most beautiful young lady he could ever recall seeing.

-----

[ Kyoto, mid-August, 1878 (11th year of the Meiji period) ]

Saitoh dropped the cigarette butt and ground it out. ^ His lips curved upward in a rueful smile and he murmured, "And as they say, the rest is history...."

With those words, Saitoh Hajime retired to his bedroom and fell asleep in his wife's arms.

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> (end of part 17) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: ^ ^ Conversations with a senile old lady and Kaoru returns... really! ^ =^\_ ^=

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## 6. Parts 18-19

Rurouni Kenshin - "That Which Lingers" (Parts 18-19) by Madamhydra

This story is set in my own ALTERNATE REALITY Rurouni Kenshin universe which I've called "The Nightwitch Tales" -- think of it as Rurouni Kenshin mixed with various supernatural and paranormal elements. ^ Other stories in this alternate reality are: "Night Visitor"; "All in the Family"; and "Romancing the Wolf".

It takes place after the end of the Kyoto story arc. ^ After that, all bets are off. ^ Elements of the Revenge story arc may show up in the story.

WARNING: ^ This story is "semi-dark" -- it has dark elements (violence, profanity, etc.) but it's not a darkfic! ^ Actually, there's

> quite a bit of romance in it.... ^ ^ ^ ^ ^\_- <p>

As always, C&C is greatly appreciated! ^ ^ ^\_-^

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>

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> Part 18: ^ UNEXPECTED VIEWS<br>

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> Text Conventions<br> ( ^ ) are character thoughts  
> / and // // represent various sorts of mental dialogue  
> \* ----- \* ----- \* ^ marks the start/end of dreams or flashbacks  
> [ ] denote visual or time notes  
<p>

\*\*\*\*\*

[ Kyoto, mid-August, 1878 (11th year of the Meiji period) ]

If she wasn't in hell, it felt pretty damn close.

Kamiya Kaoru stalked down the lonely forest path, her pace quick and purposeful. ^ So far she hadn't encountered anyone on this obscure route and was pathetically grateful for that fact. ^ She lived in constant dread of what the demon blade would do if someone foolishly attempted to confront her or attack her. ^ She had no doubts that the sword would force her to kill them without hesitation. ^ However, worrying about others helped to keep her from brooding about the sword's plans for HER.

Kaoru had been a hostage before and she never forgot that feeling of total helplessness. ^ This time, things were infinitely worse. ^ Instead of ropes and gags, chains and locks... this time, her own body was her prison.

When she had awoken in the clinic three nights ago, she had been unaware of anything being wrong... not when she got up in the middle of the night... not when she softly murmured Kenshin's name... not even when she picked up the whimsical little stone figurine that sat in Dr. Genzai's office. ^ She'd had no idea of what she was about to do until she had brutally slammed the figurine down on the back of an unsuspecting Kenshin's head.

\* ----- \* ----- \*

Instead of being frozen in horror at what she had just done, Kaoru found herself calmly stepping over Kenshin's body and picking the sword... that cursed black sword.

Trapped inside a body which no longer was hers to command, she could only watch helplessly as she easily peeled the loose wrappings away from the dark blade. ^ At that moment, she fully expected to find herself hacking off Kenshin's head with a single stroke. ^ There was nothing she could do except weep in despair ^

However, it seemed that the sword had other ideas. ^ It wasn't ready to kill Kenshin... not yet. ^ When Aoshi appeared in the doorway and called her name, she spoke but the voice was not hers. ^ The alien voice was ugly and choked with hatred. ^ And when whatever had possessed her finished delivering its threats, Kaoru found herself leaving the clinic, but not before the sword left Aoshi a parting reminder of its power.

(It did something to him. ^ I don't know what, but I'm sure of it.) ^ Kaoru could remember too clearly the sudden flash of agony that stopped Shinomori Aoshi dead in his tracks and drove him to his knees.

After fleeing the clinic, she found herself running through the darkening streets at terrific speed. ^ Her breath rasped in her throat and her leg muscles burned with the exertion, but she was just a helpless passenger, unable to slow down or stop. ^ She ended up in a modest house located on the outskirts of Tokyo. ^ Fortunately, the building had been empty and deserted. ^ The aura of old, old pain and bitterness clung around the place like a perceptible stench. ^

Her captor -- the THING that now had total control of her body -- knew exactly what it wanted and where to find it. ^ She first retrieved a black lacquered scabbard that fitted the sword perfectly.

Â She then walked through the house, picking up a few more items. Â A silken bag to hide the now sheathed sword. Â Clothing that fit her adequately. Â A hefty money pouch from a hidden cache.

Stepping out into the garden, she had gazed down into the still waters of the pond. Â Kaoru could see her wavering reflection and shuddered as a cold, wicked smile appeared on her lips. Â As she left the house, she paused briefly to look back. Â Her hand lifted and Kaoru watched herself abruptly snap her fingers. Â There was a muffled whoosh, a flash of yellow flames, and a thick column of black smoke began to climb into the night sky. Â Kaoru walked away into the darkness, leaving the small house to be devoured by the hungry fire.

\* ----- \* ----- \*

As she sat in the dark woods and stared blankly into the campfire, Kaoru thought long and hard about her current situation. Â It wasn't as if there was anything else for her to do. Her possession was different from Misao's. Â Her senses were unaffected, and as far as she could tell, her mind was entirely her own. Â Unlike Misao, she was not swamped by irrational hatred or driven by an urge to kill. Â But she was trapped inside her own skull, unable to do anything more than occasionally weep when she was alone... and that was purely on the whim of whatever monster or spirit was in control of her body.

Her captor -- or possessor -- was clearly interested in keeping her alive and well. Â That was perhaps the most worrisome aspect of it all. Â That meant that this mysterious bodiless enemy had a purpose for her and she had plenty of horrifying ideas -- all of which involved using her against Kenshin.

And when she had found her feet headed toward Kyoto, she knew....

Sometimes she wished for oblivion, to be unaware of what was going on around her, but most of the time, she was glad to be conscious. Â She clung to the hope that she might find some opening, some way to free herself. Â But no matter how she concentrated or struggled, there seemed to be an impenetrable wall between her mind and her body. Â

As time passed and she moved closer and closer to Kyoto, Kaoru gradually became almost grateful for that mental wall. Â While the wall kept her trapped inside her own mind....

....that same mental barrier also kept things OUT.

She could sense not one, but two presences in the sword. Â The first entity seemed to be that of a young man, consumed by an unspeakable hatred and hell-bent on facing Kenshin -- or rather the Hitokiri Battousai -- again. Â

The second presence was much fainter, but also much more frightening. Â

It was powerful... and it was not human.

Although the second presence or entity kept a low profile compared to

the first entity, Kaoru was not fooled into thinking that it was harmless. ^ There were times when she thought she could sense the second entity quietly scratching at the mental walls imprisoning her... testing them... trying to find a way inside. ^ It was just like a predator clawing and gnawing at a turtle shell in an effort to get to the tasty insides.... ^ She would have shuddered if she could.  
^

Curiously, the first entity seemed totally unaware of the second entity. ^ That made her wonder exactly who -- or what -- was the true puppetmaster in this horror show. ^ Was it the first presence, the entity that hated Kenshin so badly, or was it second, more secretive and cunning presence? ^

(I'll be in Kyoto early tomorrow morning. ^ And what happens then?)

Kaoru never doubted that Kenshin would come to Kyoto to confront her, but she couldn't help wonder just who would she face in Kyoto? ^

(Himura Kenshin... or the dreaded Battousai?)

-----

Just after dawn, Misao dashed down the stairs of the Aoiya at her usual reckless pace and headed for Jiya's favorite sitting room. ^ She thought back to last night and her conversation with Aoshi. ^ She couldn't help smiling every time she thought about it.

The effort required to bare his inner feelings had apparently exhausted Aoshi. ^ Misao barely had time to savor the intimacy of the moment before he had retreated behind his emotional walls again. ^ Aoshi had politely informed her that he could handle the rebandaging of his leg wounds himself. ^

But thanks to Tokio's advice, Misao was figuring out just how to deal with Aoshi's outward coldness. ^ Instead of feeling hurt or rejected, she had backed off and left him with a perky smile.

(He wants to change. ^ He wants to FEEL. ^ It's just that he doesn't really know how... but I'll be there to teach him, no matter how long it takes. ^ I swear!)

On the ground floor, she saw Yahiko trudging sleepily toward the bathhouse, then she passed by Okon who was carrying an empty water basin. ^ From around the corner, Misao could hear the sound of sputtering and cursing which could only be coming from an outraged Sano. ^

"Damn you, Okon! What's with the cold water!? ^ Couldn't you have just kicked me in the ribs or something!?"

The older woman gave her a wicked grin and a wink before heading off toward the kitchen.

Misao excitedly flung open the door to the sitting room and came to a screeching halt. ^ Jiya, the lech, was happily flirting with Tokio as she calmly served tea to the old man, Himura, Aoshi, and her husband



Saitoh.

Aoshi tensed almost imperceptibly when Misao burst in. ^ Any ordinary person wouldn't have noticed, but all men in the room were far from ordinary. ^ Aoshi's brief flicker of tension was enough to attract the attention of at least one other person in the room

As he sipped his tea, Kenshin wondered just what was going on between Aoshi and Misao.

Misao opened her mouth to speak, then suddenly bit back the words when she realized that Aoshi definitely wouldn't be happy if she blurted out the more intimate details of their late night conversation. ^ She settled for a cheery smile and said, "Did you get a good night's rest, Aoshi... -sama?" ^

She was well rewarded for her restraint. ^ Aoshi relaxed ever so slightly when he realized that Misao isn't going to make an exhibition of herself and him. ^ Misao was also glad to get a very subtle look of approval from Tokio.

Eyeing the perky girl with disfavor, Saitoh said, "Hmph. ^ If you were a puppy, you'd be wetting the floor in excitement."

"I'd what!?" shouted Misao.

"But now that you're finally up...."

"Finally!? ^ Why you jerk, how dare you act like you've been waiting for hours? ^ It's barely dawn! ^ I told you I'd be ready to go with you to the Minobe...."

"No, you're not," Saitoh said with a decided smirk. ^ Before Misao start shouting again, he reached into his tunic, pulled out a folded message, and flicked it in Misao's direction. ^ She snatched the paper in midair and scowled at it. ^ It was plainly addressed to her.

"What does Takagi Asuko want with me?"

Saitoh shrugged. ^ "You're asking me? ^ You're the one with the note. ^ Try reading it."

With a low growl of aggravation, Misao opened the note, then said in a startled voice, "She wants to see Aoshi-sama and me as soon as possible."

Kenshin gave her a curious look and said, "Does she give any reasons?"

"Not really. ^ She says that she wants the two of us to retrieve some information for her. ^ But why us?" ^ Misao glanced uncertainly at Aoshi.

He put down his tea cup and said quietly, "Because she feels that Himura should remain around Kyoto to await Kamiya Kaoru's arrival since he's Junichi's main target." ^

"So you think we should go?"

"Takagi Asuko is a difficult, abrasive woman, but no fool. ^ If she wants us to retrieve some information for her, it's most likely to be critical."

Saitoh smiled nastily. ^ "Then that leaves just you and me to interrogate that Minobe woman, Battousai."

"Sano and Yahiko will be accompanying us," was Kenshin's cool response.

"They'd better show up in the next two minutes because I'm not going to sit around waiting until the chickenhead decides to crawl out of bed."

At that moment, a grouchy, still damp Sano stomped into the room.

"Speak of the idiot and he appears," said Saitoh with a malicious grin.

-----  
It was just after dawn when the young woman called Kamiya Kaoru arrived in Kyoto. ^ With increasing numbers of panicked people leaving the city, it had been easy for her to lose herself in the commotion and slip into Kyoto unobserved. ^ She paused in an alleyway to orient herself, then headed off purposefully. ^

It only took a few minutes for her to arrive at the old Minobe compound. ^ The grounds were badly kept, hinting at an owner who was no longer capable of maintaining the property. ^ Or perhaps an owner who simply didn't care any more. ^

She smiled coldly as she ignored the front entrance and slipped in through the back gates. ^ Her caution was unnecessary. ^ The large house was essentially deserted. ^ Except for a single elderly maid, there seemed to be no other servants around. ^ Kaoru silently made her way toward front of the house and the quarters of the only member of the Minobe family still in residence.

-----  
Minobe Emi was an old, lonely, bitter woman. ^ She had never had many friends and as the years went by, those friends had drifted away, alienated by her increasingly hostile and strange behavior. ^ For the last decade or so, she'd spent an increasing portion of her time sitting in her rooms, muttering to herself, and waiting. ^ However, the eerie events plaguing Kyoto told her that her revenge against the Battousai had finally truly begun after thirteen long years.

The door slid open with no warning. ^ Emi whirled around to viciously reprimand the intruder, but something in the young woman's malicious smile stopped her in the tracks.

"The years have been unkind to you, Aunt."

Emi slowly rose to her feet and babbled, "You... you know me?" ^ She blinked and whispered, "Junichi?"

The younger woman laughed bitterly. "Oh yes. It's me. In spirit, if not in body."

Before the conversation could continue, the elderly house servant knocked on the door to the room and said, "Minobe-sama, you have several visitors."

The old woman said irritably, "Oh, do make them go away."

"But they insist," said the nervous female servant in a near-whimper. "And I don't think they're the sort to take 'no' as an answer."

"Who are they?" Emi asked.

"I don't know, but one of them is a tall, evil-looking police officer. He called himself Inspector Fujita Goro or something like that. He's accompanied by a lady, a scruffy streetfighter, and a young boy."

Inside her mind, Kaoru couldn't decide whether to dance for joy or to have a fit of panic. If Saitoh, Sano, and Yahiko were here, it was almost certain that....

"Is that all?" muttered Emi.

"No, Minobe-sama. The last one's a young man with red hair and a nasty set of scars on his face."

(KENSHIN!!!)

However, Kaoru's body threw back her head and laughed cruelly.

"What's so funny!?" snapped Emi.

"You mean you don't know, you stupid old woman? Your visitors could only be Saitoh Hajime and Himura Battousai."

"What!?"

"Don't tell me that you didn't realize that they were bound to come here once I told them my name."

"You told them your name!? Why?"

A vicious expression appeared on Kaoru's face as she snarled, "Because they have to know what this is all about. That's why! Otherwise it's all pointless!"

The old Minobe aunt edged away nervously from Kaoru as the younger woman's expression turned thoughtful.

"But the time isn't right. My enemy hasn't fully returned yet."

(You bastard! How DARE you try to force Kenshin into becoming the Battousai again!), Kaoru fumed silently.

Junichi made Kaoru's body advance menacingly toward the quivering servant. "After a brutal slap, she grabbed a hold of the servant's kimono and hissed, "Let them in. But if you give them any hint of my presence...." She gave the servant a vicious shaking. "You'll be begging for death. Do you understand me?"

"Y-y-y-yes. I understand." The servant groveled a bit, then scurried down the hall.

Kaoru turned back to Emi. "The same goes for you, old crone. If they find out that I'm here, I'll be happy to demonstrate the power all these years of suffering have bought me."

Emi couldn't stop her knees shaking. This wasn't the way she'd planned it. She should be in control. She should be the one giving orders. But the malicious gleam in the young woman's eyes told her that the slightest mistake or attempt at disobedience would not be tolerated.

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Misao and Aoshi were escorted to Tokio's grand-aunt as soon as they arrived. Just like the previous day, the old woman was accompanied by Tokio's aunt. Takagi Yuka reminded Misao of a happy, plump sparrow with her bright black eyes, her cheerful smile, and the quick little movements of her head.

Asuko watched Aoshi as they sat down in front of her and said, "You seem recovering well enough."

Aoshi coolly replied, "I am not incapacitated."

"Apparently not," came the old woman's sharp reply.

Misao jumped to her feet and snapped, "You said you wanted us to get some information for you. Well, what is it and why do you need it?"

"Patience, kitten." Asuko waited for Misao to sit down before saying, "You asked if I knew how to destroy this demon sword last night, correct?"

The girl leaned forward eagerly. "You know of a way?"

"I've narrowed the possibilities, but I need to know the exact name of the demon which created the weapon before I can be more certain."

"So that's the information you want us to locate," said Aoshi.

"It's more a matter of retrieving the information, not finding it. I know where the answer lies. Now someone has to fetch it."

Misao looked suspicious. "Why didn't YOU send one of your own people to get the demon's name?"

"I could have done that, true, but it's not that simple, girl. The mission is not without its hazards. Since you have a vested

interest in that knowledge and since the Battousai and Saitoh have other matters to deal with, it is appropriate that you two should go."

Aoshi gave her a nod of acknowledgment. "Where is the information located?"

Asuko tossed him a folded map. Misao hovered over his shoulder as he examined it.

"At a shrine dedicated to an ancient primordial spirit. Its real name is lost in time but the local folk call it the Hantaakiraa. The Hunter-killer or something like that," said Asuko with a shrug.

"So this is the demon...?" asked Misao.

The old woman chuckled. "Oh no. Hardly. This spirit is reputed to be the relentless foe of our unnamed demon. If the demon's name is written down anywhere, it will be at this shrine. It's located in the mountains, east of Kyoto. It's only a few hours walk."

Misao whispered to Aoshi, "Hey, that shrine's not too far from Hiko Seijuro's place."

Aoshi murmured to Misao, "Hiko?" A brief pause, then he added, "I see. In case Himura loses himself in his memories of the past."

"Yeah. On our way back, we can drop in and see if he's around."

Aoshi folded the map and addressed the old woman. "Very well. Is that all?"

Asuko gave him an arrogant stare and said, "Leave us. I wish to speak to the girl alone."

He gracefully rose to his feet but did not move away. He stared coldly at Asuko and said, "You do not command me." He turned at Misao and awaited her decision.

As she hesitated, Asuko snapped, "Girl, do you need a man to hold your hand or give you permission to speak to an old woman?"

Misao flushed angrily, then turned to Aoshi and gave him a sharp nod. "I'll be with you in a few minutes."

After Aoshi exited the room, Asuko snapped her fingers and held out a bony hand. Misao stared at her blankly.

"Well, girl? Don't just stand there gaping like an idiot! I'm an old woman. I don't have all day!"

"Well what?" asked Misao in a confused voice.

"Your knives, girl. Your knives!" Turning to the other woman, Asuko muttered, "Silly little fool."

Becoming only more confused, Misao pulled out one of her throwing knives and handed it to Asuko, who examined it with a surprisingly knowledgeable eye. "The old woman then handed it to the plump woman behind her.

Yuka tilted her head and said in a chirpy voice, "Nice weapon. Good balance and weight, but readily disposable if necessary. Then again, Omakamatsu always does good work. He's a practical man."

Misao stared at Yuka, her mouth agape. (How... how does she know the craftsman who makes those knives for me?)

"But it's not the usual Oniwabanshuu style, my dear. Who designed it for you?" asked the cheerful woman as she expertly flipped the blade in her hand.

Misao muttered, "Ah... someone who helped to raised me." It had been Hannya who had given Misao her first set.

Asuko said impatiently, "So you have some decent weapons. Now, can you use them?"

The girl snapped, "Of course I can! Pick a target!"

Without warning, Asuko snatched a plum from a dish and tossed it high and fast into the air. Misao instantly snatched out a kunai with her good right hand and hurled it. The throwing knife split the fruit neatly before thunking into one of the support beams.

Without pause, Asuko snapped, "The third slat, eye level on the left door."

Misao grabbed for three of her kunai and flung them as fast as she could. Two of the knives landed precisely on target, but one was a thumbnail off.

There was a brief pause as Asuko rose to her feet. After examining the knives and the sliced plum, the old woman reluctantly said, "Not bad, girl, but your form's absolutely atrocious. Where did you ever pick up such bad habits?"

"Wha... What's wrong with my form!?"

In a disgusted voice, Asuko scolded, "Sloppy. Too much wasted motion. Too much unnecessary noise. And much, much too slow."

Yuka waved her hands in a placating gesture and murmured, "Maa maa! She's still young. She does quite well for someone who's basically self-taught...."

"Taught herself. Hmph. You would think that there has to be at least one of the famed Oniwabanshuu who's capable of giving her some badly needed coaching."

Misao gaped at the absolutely bizarre scene of a middle-aged matron and an old woman critiquing her knife throwing skills as casually as if they were discussing embroidery or flower arranging. Finally, she sputtered, "And... and I suppose you can do better!?"

Asuko snorted contemptuously. "I leave all that high energy activity to the younger folk, but I can tell you that my technique was never as bad as yours." The old woman shrugged, then added, "But if you survive the next few days, you may come back and have Risako teach you how to use those throwing knives of yours properly."

Tokio's grand-aunt picked up an object and casually tossed it to Misao who instinctively caught it. To the girl's surprise, it was a sheathed blade, slightly longer than a normal tanto.

"Huh?" Misao partially removed the blade from its sheath and was astounded by its quality and exquisite workmanship. She stammered, "I... I can't...."

Asuko said nastily, "You DO know how to use it, don't you?"

"Of course I know how to use it! But I don't need...."

"It's your decision, of course. Throwing knives are well and good, but you need to carry something better designed for hand-to-hand work." The old woman paused and added in slightly gentler voice, "The gift is freely offered, girl. There is no price or obligation that goes with it."

Yuka said softly, "But it would be well to remember that this is not often the case, Misao-chan. This is one of the few occasions that you will receive an offer this generous or unencumbered, my dear."

"Now go away and get that information." Asuko flicked her hand as if she was shooing away a pesky cat.

Sliding the blade back into its scabbard, Misao found herself respectfully bowing to Asuko. She retrieved her throwing knives and left the room in a daze.

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Now alone with Asuko, Yuka murmured, "You were overly harsh with your criticism, you know. Considering her age and the woefully inadequate training she's had with those knives of hers, the girl's quite impressive. Give her some good coaching and she can be formidable."

"She's not bad," admitted Asuko in a reluctant voice.

Yuka tipped her head like a curious bird. "You're not trying to make a Nightwitch out of her, are you?"

Yuka's last words had a teasing tone but Asuko answered seriously. "Unfortunately, she doesn't have the blood or if she does, it appeared in her family so many generations ago that it doesn't matter." The old woman shrugged and smiled coldly. "That's not why I'm interested in her. I just can't stand a waste of good talent."

Yuka giggled and said, "I think she's charming."

"Hmph. She has spirit, I'll say that for her. With a little discipline and self-control, she'll do nicely. And if the girl follows Tokio's advice and develops some patience, she'll have that man of hers in the palm of her hand."

"Shinomori's SO handsome," the middle-aged woman said with a wistful sigh.

Asuko groaned and said in a threatening voice, "Yuka, if you're going to become all starry-eyed and gushy...."

"Oops, I'm sorry. But I'm sure that some of the youngsters are wondering what kind of children he'd sire."

"Well, at least a few of them show decent taste in men. They could do much worse. Hmph. That reminds me. I often played Go with Shinomori's grandfather. He was much the same as his grandson, with all this passion and emotion buried underneath that cold, reserved outward manner. I suppose that many females find all that mystery very enticing."

"Oh my, but I don't think Misao-chan would approve of sharing Shinomori-san with anyone. And besides, the two of them are in love, even if he doesn't admit it to himself yet." said Yuka in a worried voice.

"What's love got to do with producing children?" said Asuko pragmatically. "If the girls want a child sired by Shinomori, all they need is a quick tumble and that's that. The only reason that they haven't tried that with that rogue Saitoh is because no one in their right mind would dare to cross Tokio. Talk about a possessive woman!" She chuckled nastily.

"Hajime-san knows a good thing when he sees it. Do you think Misao-chan will take you up on your offer?"

"She's a fool if she doesn't. She's going to realize that her current skills aren't good enough, especially if she wants to hang around with the likes of Shinomori Aoshi. It's equally obvious that the Oniwabanshuu are not training her properly. Either she's going to have to give up fighting altogether or she's going to have to get better. Much better. One should do something superbly or not at all. Being a mediocre fighter is one of the quickest ways to die."

Yuka sighed, "If that's true for Shinomori and Misao-chan, then it goes double for Himura and that Kamiya girl."

"Yes, but that's not my problem. Let Tokio and Risako sort that mess out."

The two women concentrated on their tea for several minutes, then Yuka said, "You heard that Misao-chan and Shinomori are planning to visit Hiko Seijuro."

A trace of warmth appeared on Asuko's face. "Seijuro. I've always had a sneaking fondness for that boy."

"But he and Risako don't like each other much, do they?"



"Seijuro and Risako have cordially despised each other since Risako was born. ^ She thinks that he doesn't know a male's proper place. ^ He's never forgiven her for abandoning her baby, the child of his best friend."

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> (end of part 18) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: ^ I didn't get as far as I hoped, but I'm working on it!  
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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>  
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> Part 19: TOTAL ECLIPSE OF THE HEART  
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[ Kyoto, mid-August, 1878 (11th year of the Meiji period) ]

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The storm clouds that hovered over Kyoto blocked all hint of sunlight, plunging the beleaguered city and the surrounding area into a perpetual sort of dusk. ^

The ghosts continued to walk the streets, no longer mere misty apparitions, but tangible beings which could touch... and kill. ^ Buildings destroyed long ago during the Bakamatsu suddenly reappeared. ^ The number of inexplicable, but ominous events steadily grew as family altars collapsed, shrines burst into flames, temple bells cracked, holy trees withered....

Kyoto was slowly drowning in an unholy darkness.

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As Misao rejoined him after her private talk with Takagi Asuko, Aoshi noticed the slightly dazed look in Misao's eyes and the short, sheathed blade in her hand. ^ She didn't say anything immediately, but soon after leaving the Takagi compound, she mumbled, "I had the weirdest conversation...." ^ She glanced at Aoshi and suddenly asked, "Is my throwing form sloppy?"

Aoshi raised an eyebrow at the odd question. ^ "Why do you ask?"

"It had to do with something Asuko said.... ^ Well, what do you think?"

He was silent for a moment, then answered indirectly. ^ "There's some room for improvement."

She scowled and muttered, "That bad, huh?"

"I didn't say that."

"No, but that's what you meant, right?"

"You know how to use your kunai competently, but...."

"....but I could do better."

"Yes."

She exhaled heavily and said, "Oh hell. ^ That's exactly what the old woman said, although she wasn't nearly so nice about it. ^ She told me that I needed a lot more training with my throwing knives."

Aoshi mentally filed away this interesting tidbit of information for future reference. ^ Glancing at the short, sheathed tanto carelessly shoved in Misao's sash, he asked calmly, "It seems you had an interesting conversation with Takagi Asuko."

"You have no idea." ^ Misao held up the blade and said, "And she gave me this." ^ She handed it to Aoshi, who examined the long, silvery tanto carefully before returning it to her.

"It's an exceptionally fine weapon. ^ Do you know why she gave it to you?"

"She said that throwing knives are fine and all that, but that I needed to have a more serious weapon for hand-to-hand fighting. ^ Just in case." ^ Misao gave the blade an uncertain look. ^

They continued walking in silence for a few minutes, then Aoshi said quietly, "She has a point, in view of what's been happening recently."

"I know but...." ^

"If this was the Bakamatsu, there would be no question of you carrying such a weapon," he added. ^ He didn't bother asking Misao if she knew how to use it. ^ ^ Both he and Hannya had taught her the basics of using a blade and Aoshi doubted that Misao had forgotten any of her lessons. ^ ^ She might not be an expert like some of the other female Oniwabanshuu, but he knew she had the ability to use the tanto if necessary.

Misao was also recalling those lessons of long ago... she could just picture Hannya patiently teaching her how to hold a blade as Aoshi quietly sat in the background, watching her. ^ Thoughts of Hannya reminded her that there was something that she had wanted to ask Aoshi, but it took her some time to gather up her courage. ^

They were well outside the city before she finally said, "Aoshi?" ^

"Yes?"

"That clearing outside of Tokyo, where I nearly killed... where we fought... the place with the four headstones... is that where...?"

"Yes. ^ The resting place of Hannya and the others."

"Um...." ^ Several minutes passed before she continued. ^ "I've been meaning to ask you for a while but... back in Tokyo, when Saitoh asked you how you knew about Kinslayer and its ability to possess people. ^ You said 'Han...', then suddenly changed your mind." ^

Aoshi glanced at her. ^ Was she imagining things or was he looking uneasy?

She tried to figure out a way to avoid sounding like an idiot or a lunatic, but finally gave up. ^ Misao took a deep breath and said, "Did you mean to say... Hannya? ^ That it was Hannya who told you?"

At first she thought he wasn't going to answer, then he halted and stared at the surrounding forest. ^

Misao gently touched his arm. ^ She could feel the tenseness of his muscles as she whispered, "It was, wasn't it? ^ Somehow... Hannya told you what was going on, didn't he?"

Aoshi said quietly, "Yes, it was." ^ He slowly turned to face her. ^ But instead of disbelief or sorrow on her face, Misao was smiling. ^ Wistfully, perhaps, but she was definitely smiling. ^ Her next words gave him quite a shock.

"He's still looking out for us. ^ Like he's always done."

"What do you mean by... 'us'?"

She blinked quickly to keep her tears from flowing and said, "You see, I've seen him too."

As he stared blankly at her, Misao turned to look up through the leafy canopy at the dark, cloud-choked sky. ^

"It was during the battle at the Aoiya, when Kamatari, Henya, and that really fat guy attacked us. ^ Kamatari got in a really good hit and knocked me onto the roof over the front door."

Aoshi's thoughts flashed back to that night after his return from Shishio's stronghold. ^ He had been so wrapped up in his own thoughts at that time -- trying to deal with the pain of having his private world of lies and self-deception so utterly shattered by Himura -- that he had not paid much attention to anything else. ^ But now he remembered....

(She was really hurt. ^ The stiffness in her movements... the times when she could barely catch her breath.... ^ How could I've been so selfish not to notice her pain?)

"I was nearly unconscious when I heard someone calling my name." ^ She hesitated, then whispered, "I couldn't believe it. ^ It was Hannya. ^ He told me.... ^ He told me...." ^ She turned to him, her beautiful blue eyes suspiciously bright with unshed tears.

"He told me that you were coming back. ^ That Himura had kept his promise and that you were coming back to us... to me! ^ And when I heard that, I knew I couldn't simply lie there and give up. ^ I couldn't let Shishio and his band of hoodlums win. ^ How could I let Kaoru die when Himura had kept his promise to me?"

Her corners of her mouth turned down and her eyes darkened. ^ "I owe him so much and now... now because of me, Kenshin could lose everything he's fought and suffered for... Kaoru, his life, his very soul!" ^ She grabbed at Aoshi's trenchcoat. ^

"It's just not FAIR!!!" she wailed and buried her face against his chest.

As Misao quietly sobbed into his shirt, Aoshi mutely stared down at her fine black hair. ^ Almost involuntarily, he lifted a hand and stroked her head ever so gently. ^ It was the briefest of gestures, one that the emotionally overwrought girl probably did not even notice.

He silently gazed down at the hand he had brushed against her head. ^ As he stared at a long silky strand of hair clinging delicately to his black fingerless glove, he came to an uncomfortable and terrifying realization.

He loved her.

It wasn't an entirely new emotion. ^ The feeling had been around for some time, ignored and unnoticed, rather like a dormant seed lying in cold, dry barren earth. ^ But Misao... Misao had somehow brought that seed... that feeling... to life.

Perhaps it was the fact that she was crying, not for her own suffering and pain, but rather for her friends. ^ Perhaps it was simply her personality -- the warmth, the openness, the playfulness, the sheer joy in living -- that was so different from his own. ^

Aoshi had never considered himself as a poetic or romantic person, but in that moment, he couldn't help thinking of Misao as the warm, gentle rain which nourished his barren soul... then he ruefully remembered all the mischief and trouble she managed to get herself into. ^ ^

She was unpredictable, yet loyal... gentle, yet fierce... impulsive, yet determined... she was impossible to categorize.

(She's just... Misao.)

Looking down at her, he thought, (This is what I fought for, back in that clearing. ^ Not so much for her life, but for what... for everything she is. ^ Now I truly understand what Hannya was talking about. ^ If I had failed... if I had permitted Misao to kill me, it would have destroyed her. ^ Her body might have survived, but the real Misao would have been gone... forever.)

And he found THAT possibility unbearable.

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While Aoshi was absorbed with his own thoughts, Misao's sobs were gradually fading into sniffles. "She eventually realized that she had thoroughly soaked Aoshi's shirt with her tears. Misao hastily blew her nose on the sash of her Oniwabanshuu outfit, then tilted her head up to sneak a quick peek at him. She found him watching her with a slight frown on his face. Misao felt her cheeks heat up with embarrassment.

(Oh god, what must he be thinking...?)

With a final sniffle, she muttered, "I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me. I never used to be such a crybaby."

She groped again for her sash as she felt her nose starting to run. Aoshi somehow produced a handkerchief, which she accepted gratefully. When she was through blowing her nose, he quietly said, "It's quite understandable. You've been through some very traumatic experiences these last few days, Misao. And it's never easy to confront the darkness within oneself. I know that from personal experience."

"But it's so very ugly," she mumbled despairingly.

"It always is. Most people never have to face such unpleasant truths about themselves. Unfortunately, you were not so lucky. But it's what you do with that knowledge that's important. You can let the darkness and all the things that come along with it -- guilt, rage, hatred -- consume you. Or you can accept the fact it exists, then gather the inner strength to forge your own path."

Misao said quietly, "Is that what you were doing all that time at the temple, after you came back from Shishio's stronghold?"

"Yes. I suspect Himura did much the same thing during his time as a rurouni."

"But how do you know which path to take?" she cried in frustration.

"There are no right or wrong answers. Some people reject that inner darkness like Himura has done. Others like Saitoh have made their own sort of peace with the darkness within and are able to use it to their own advantage."

"And what about you?"

He glanced at the dimly lit forest and quietly said, "I'm not entirely sure yet."

"But if you and Himura have so much trouble handling it, how on earth am I supposed to!?" she moaned, her shoulders sagging in a hopeless gesture.

But to her surprise, a warm hand gently nudged her chin upward. As she stared up at Aoshi in astonishment, he said firmly, "Don't give up now, Misao. You have the strength to deal with this. Don't let that cursed sword win after all you've been through. Don't allow despair to destroy what you are."

"What I... am?"

"The girl... no, the young woman that everyone cares about -- Okina, Hannya, Himura, Kaoru, the other Oniwabanshuu... all of them."

A tentative smile appeared on her face, but an almost desperate question lurked in her eyes.

(But what about you, Aoshi?)

He knew what she was silently asking. ^ He knew what she was hoping for. ^ However, an entire lifetime of training and restraint could not be so easily overcome. ^ He simply couldn't bring himself to say the words she wanted so badly to hear.

But she got her answer anyway, as Aoshi's fingers brushed her cheek in a fleeting, but infinitely tender caress.

She quickly lifted her own hand and grasped his fingers before he could pull away. ^ They stared at each other for a long moment as she rested her head against his palm.

(One simple thing.... ^ When I saw Saitoh and Tokio, I wondered how a mere touch could mean so much. ^ Now I know. ^ One simple thing between you and me....) ^ Misao closed her eyes and uttered a long, happy sigh.

Aoshi felt her breath against his wrist, a faint tickle like the touch of a butterfly. ^ He knew he would remember this moment forever.

....the scent of her hair, the softness of her skin, the steady beat of her heart....

They stood together for a brief, yet timeless instant in the dimly lit forest. ^ But the quiet magic of the moment soon faded as they both recalled the dangers that still lay before them and the terrible darkness that threatened to consume their entire world. ^

As one, they each released the other's hand and turned to head deeper into the now silent forest. ^ They were Oniwabanshuu and they had a mission to perform.

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At the Minobe house, Saitoh, Kenshin and their companions waited with varying degrees of patience for Minobe Emi to speak to them. ^ Kenshin and Tokio both appeared perfectly content to wait as long as necessary. ^ Saitoh merely looked bored as Sano paced impatiently and Yahiko nervously rapped his shinai on the floor.

Finally, a door slid open at the opposite end of the room and an old woman entered. ^ According to Saitoh's information, Minobe Emi was no more than 65 years old, but she seemed positively ancient. ^ Everything about her seemed to shout neglect and decay. ^ She was a shocking contrast to Takagi Asuko, a woman who was well into her nineties, but infinitely more alive and alert than this tired, half-senile old woman who was the last living member of the Minobe family.

She sat down clumsily and snapped in a querulous voice, "Well, what do you want?"

Saitoh gave the woman a malicious little smile. "We're here to ask you some questions about one of your family treasures which appears to have gone missing. A sword called Kinslayer."

She rudely interrupted him. "What of it? Why are you pestering an old woman with these questions?" she muttered in a hostile, defensive voice.

Kenshin quietly said, "Why did you give that sword to your nephew Junichi?"

The old woman turned an alarming shade of red. For an instant, Sano was afraid that the woman was about to have a massive stroke and drop dead at their feet. Spittle flew as Emi suddenly cackled with wild laughter. Jabbing a bony finger directly at Kenshin, she shrieked, "For YOU of all people to ask that question! Why!? You're why! I gave Kinslayer to that fool boy in order to get revenge against the famed Hitokiri Battousai!"

She didn't give Kenshin the chance to say anything as she burst into a disjointed tirade. "You destroyed my entire family during the Bakamatsu no Douran! My brother, my husband,... both of my sons! All of them, dead by your hand! You left me with nothing except a fool of a nephew and a brainless twit of a niece! All my hopes and dreams, gone in a few strokes of your bloody blade!"

The old woman gulped frantically for air, then continued. "But you'll pay. Oh, how you will pay. Just as I have lost everything that mattered to me, so will you!"

As she giggled triumphantly, Kenshin said harshly, "When you gave Kinslayer to your nephew Junichi, did you have any idea what would happen?"

A vicious look of malice appeared on the old woman's face. "I wasn't sure the exact form the revenge would take, but I knew it would be something terrible. Even at his best, Junichi could not hope to defeat the Battousai. Then I remembered the sword. I read the old legends about Kinslayer and its unholy powers. After all these centuries of being locked away, the blade was dormant, its spirit trapped in slumber, but I knew that that hatred could bring the blade back to life. And while Junichi was an useless boy, he was very, very good at hating people. So I gave him the sword and told him that if he wanted his revenge badly enough, the sword would eventually give him the power to do so."

The red-haired swordsman's voice was sharp as he said, "Your plan worked too well. Do you know that because of that sword, your niece Junko destroyed the man she loved and his entire family, then she committed suicide? And that was just the beginning of the carnage and misery that blade's caused. Do you know how many people have already died because of that cursed sword? How much suffering it has already caused? All this for revenge against a single man?"

Emi seemed totally unmoved by her niece's unfortunate fate. "Do you

think I care? "The entire world can fall into the abyss of hell itself, just as long as you pay for your sins against me!"

She leaned forward and shrieked, "YOU KILLED MY FAMILY!!!"

Kenshin's eyes abruptly narrowed. His reply was both savage and terrifyingly cold.

"THEY WERE IN MY WAY."

Yahiko's eyes widened in shock at Kenshin's blunt and brutal response. He glanced quickly at Sano and could see the look of dismay on the fighter's face. Sitting behind Kenshin, they couldn't see the expression on their friend's face, but it was apparently intimidating enough to frighten the half-senile old woman into some sense of caution.

The starkness of Kenshin's words seemed to startle even Saitoh, but he quickly recovered and smiled. Sano caught the fleeting smirk on the policeman's face and barely managed to keep himself from jumping up and slugging the man.

(You bastard! Kenshin's slowly turning back into the Battousai and you think it's funny!? Or is that what you really wanted all along?)

Saitoh stared coolly at Emi and said in a bored voice, "So we now know your part in all this and why both you and Junichi want revenge on the Battousai. But tell me, why is Junichi after me?"

The old woman looked startled. "What are you talking about?"

"What's his reason -- or your reason -- for targeting me?"

With a bewildered look on her withered face, she stammered, "But I don't have any grudge against you. And as far as I know, Junichi has no reason to desire revenge against you!"

Saitoh murmured, "Now isn't that interesting? Then again, you haven't seen Junichi for over a decade. There's no telling what weird ideas might have started festering in that half-witted brain of his."

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Because of an architectural quirk of the Minobe house, Kaoru could clearly hear the entire conversation from several rooms away. When she heard Kenshin's last words, she knew that the Battousai was winning. Kaoru wanted to weep with despair.

But she couldn't. Instead, she could only sit helplessly by as she heard herself utter a soft snarl of rage at Saitoh's contemptuous comments.

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Back in the sitting room, Saitoh shrugged and said, "This is pointless. Your information on Kinslayer. Where is it?"



The old woman sneered at him, then recoiled nervously as the former Shinsengumi stalked toward her with a predatory stride.

"Where is it?" he repeated in the same cool, dangerous voice.

"Wha... how dare you threaten an old woman!" she blustered.

Saitoh gave her a bone-chilling smile. "You lost any claim to protection or consideration when you decided to use Kinslayer as the instrument of your revenge, even though you were perfectly aware of the havoc that cursed sword was capable of creating."

Sano knew that Saitoh was not bluffing. If the policeman thought that Junichi's aunt had important information, the man would do anything necessary to get it. The fact that she was a nearly helpless old woman certainly wasn't going to stop the ex-Shinsengumi. Sano turned to his friend and said, "Kenshin...."

The red-haired swordsman rose to his feet and settled his sakabatou in place. But instead of objecting to Saitoh's actions, Kenshin merely gave the old woman a stony stare, apparently content to let Saitoh do what he considered necessary.

"Kenshin..., " Sano protested again.

His friend turned slightly, and said a quiet, relentless voice, "Over fifty people died in the streets last night, Sano. Someone is probably being murdered by these apparitions at this very moment. We're running out of time. She may have the answer to stopping the carnage. We need that information."

"But she's just an old woman!" Yahiko protested.

Without taking his eyes off the cringing old woman, Saitoh said, "Is an old crone who kills by poison any less a murderer than a young man who stabs someone in the street? She is no less guilty." He flicked a quick glance in Kenshin's direction and apparently saw something that satisfied him.

The policeman watched with malicious amusement as Emi shivered in fright, her eyes rapidly flicking back and forth between Kenshin and Saitoh. The policeman chuckled quietly before speaking.

"After all that's happened to the Battousai recently, I don't think he's in any mood to help you."

Saitoh was quite correct. At that moment, Kenshin had very little mercy left in him and certainly not for his self-proclaimed enemy... the woman whose crazed desire for vengeance threatened to destroy not only Himura Kenshin himself, but also the woman he loved, the entire city of Kyoto, and very possibly the entire country.

The female house servant suddenly scurried into the room and nervously wrung her hands.

"Excuse me, Inspector Fujita?"

Saitoh drawled irritably, "What is it now?"

She hastily backed away from the doorway and allowed a young policeman to enter. "He saluted sharply and handed Saitoh a note.

"An urgent message, sir."

Saitoh quickly scanned the contents and said, "Very well. "Wait outside. "I'll be with you shortly." "

His gaze drifted back to Emi, his eyes even colder than before. "He said softly, "So you don't care if the whole world goes to hell as long as you have your revenge for... what, four dead people?" "He tapped the paper impatiently in his palm. "Well, it seems that you just might get your wish, you worthless old hag."

Kenshin said sharply, "What's happened?"

The policeman smiled sourly. "Just what I expected. "Several massacred families have been found in the area surrounding Kyoto. "They were torn to pieces." "

Saitoh turned again to look at Minobe Emi. "In his amber eyes, she read her fate. "She was already a dead woman. "Perhaps not immediately, not while she still had her uses, but she knew that Saitoh had already marked her for execution. "He would return for her soon enough.

Emi's attention suddenly drawn to the unnamed woman who had accompanied Saitoh and the Battousai. "She had initially ignored the woman, but now Emi felt strangely chilled by the beautiful woman's gaze. "Like a goddess sitting in judgment, the woman placidly watched her, wholly unmoved by Emi's obvious fear and desperation.

"Well? "Are you going to cooperate?" Saitoh said testily.

Realizing that she was trapped, Minobe Emi lost her defiant pose. "Her shoulders sagging in defeat, the old woman slowly nodded.

Saitoh glanced at Kenshin and said, "Well, do you think you can handle her by yourself?"

"Yes. "Where are you going?"

Saitoh waved the message in the air. "I need to investigate these deaths. "It's just possible that these murders are unrelated to the events in Kyoto."

Sano snapped, "How likely is THAT!?"

For once, the policeman seemed disinclined to tease the fighter. "He simply shrugged, then stalked out of the room. "Tokio silently stood, gave Kenshin, Sano, and Yahiko a polite bow, then followed her husband.

-----

As they left the Minobe house, Saitoh suddenly stopped, then glanced back at the old building.

Tokio said, "What's wrong, Hajime-san?"

He scowled. "I'm not sure. But something about that house...."  
He shook his head sharply, then glanced back at his wife.

"If you don't need my company, I have a little more research to do for grand-aunt Asuko," Tokio said.

"Fine. I'll see you this evening, then."

She bowed, then watched as Saitoh collected the young policeman who had been waiting for him. After the two men disappeared around the corner, Tokio headed in the opposite direction toward the Takagi compound.

-----  
As Kaoru watched Saitoh's wife from a second-story room of the Minobe house, she felt her lips curve into a malevolent smile. Inwardly, she shivered as she heard herself whisper, "The Battousai's already lost his true love. And soon it'll be your turn, Saitoh."

The young woman slipped out of the house undetected and headed for the forested mountains just east of Kyoto.

-----  
For the last hour, Aoshi and Misao had been travelling ever deeper into the forest. During that time, they didn't say a word, but even as they kept a wary eye on their surroundings, both of them couldn't help thinking about that brief, but wondrous moment of intimacy that now lay between them... that single touch that communicated so much more than mere words could. And every so often, Misao would catch Aoshi looking at her with a strangely gentle look in his green-grey eyes.

Then it happened in an instant, without warning.

One minute, they had been walking side by side along the shadowy forest path... the next instant, a thick, cold mist rolled across the pathway, obscuring everything.

As the mist gradually thinned, Aoshi swiftly surveyed his surroundings, his hands ready on his sheathed kodachi. His face went cold and still as he realized that Misao was nowhere in sight. When a flicker of motion caught his eye, he whirled to see a slim shadowy figure approaching. As the person came closer, he had no trouble recognizing her or the sword slung over her shoulder.

"Kaoru," he said flatly. "Or should I say, Minobe Junichi."

She gave him a spine-chilling smile.

"Shinomori Aoshi, I've been waiting for you." It was Kaoru's own voice, but Aoshi had no problem remembering who was really speaking.

^ He could also see the quiet anguish lurking in her eyes, the only outward trace of the young woman he knew. ^ Aoshi didn't bother to respond to her words, but remained silent, poised and waiting.

"Despite that cold, unfeeling facade of yours, you're worried about Misao, aren't you?" ^ She cocked her head slightly. ^

Aoshi's eye narrowed, but that was his only reaction to Kaoru's taunts. ^ She uttered a bored sigh, then snapped her fingers.

Several tall, spindly shapes arose from the foul mist clinging to the ground. ^ Although they stood on two feet, they were clearly not human, but rather twisted travesties of dogs. ^ Stiff black hair sparsely covered their stringy muscled bodies and their abnormally long limbs ended with vicious, filthy-looking claws. ^ The obvious leader of the pack stood nearly a full foot taller than the others.

Aoshi silently unsheathed his kodachi and watched warily, assessing the creatures' strengths and weaknesses.

"I'll let my pets occupy your attention while I hunt down dear little Misao. ^ But just so you won't have things TOO easy...." ^ She swiftly reached over her shoulder and drew Kinslayer from its scabbard. ^

Aoshi tensed. ^ He remembered too well what had happened the last time he had confronted the cursed sword. ^ He immediately started to retreat, but it was too late.

Kaoru held up Kinslayer's black blade before her, one hand grasping the hilt, the other lightly supporting the tip... then suddenly tilted the sword ever so slightly.

A brief flare of darkness obscured his vision for an instant... then the agony hit him. ^ Aoshi barely managed to keep his grip on his weapons as his knees buckled and he crumpled to the ground.

-----

Trapped inside her body, Kaoru could only scream silently in protest as she watched him collapse with a choked cry of pain. ^

(NO! ^ Damn you, NO! ^ Stop it!)

-----

As Aoshi struggled back to his feet, his pain-fogged vision could barely make out the shapes of the approaching monsters. ^ He dimly heard Kaoru call out in a mocking voice.

"Don't worry, I'll be back for you soon enough. ^ Misao won't be much of a challenge, but I'll take my enjoyment where I can."

As she disappeared back into the murky forest, Aoshi gritted his teeth in suppressed fury and prepared to deal with his unnatural

attackers.

-----  
Saitoh surveyed the devastated farm in disgust. "In the still, heavy air, flies buzzed and crawled over the cold, stiff bodies of the massacred farmers. As the other policemen retched and struggled to control their stomachs, he took a close look at the corpses."

No normal human could leave marks like those on the bodies. "Oh, with the right weapons, there were individual fighters who were capable of doing so much damage -- himself, Aoshi, and the Battousai, just to name a few. But something told him that there was something definitely unnatural at work here."

He had had this feeling once before... this sense of 'wrongness'.  
"It had been eight years ago and strangely enough, it had occurred in this same general area."

Eight years ago.... "At that time, he had been framed by corrupt officials, men who were desperately afraid of what he would find during his investigations. In his efforts to locate the documents that would both clear him and identify the true enemies, he had basically abducted Tokio from her Tokyo home. Not that she had actually objected. Ever practical, she had calmly packed a small travelling bag and allowed him to drag her all the way to Kyoto without a single word of complaint."

Saitoh smiled faintly. "How strange it was to think that the woman he had intended to use as bait to lure his pursuers out into the open had ended up saving his life more than once on that little adventure. Tokio had turned out to be a woman of numerous and unexpected talents."

He gazed thoughtfully at the surrounding mountains. "That affair eight years ago had started out simply enough, but when they arrived in this area east of Kyoto, things had rapidly become... strange. He shook his head and shoved the memories of the past aside. Something was out there. Something that didn't belong in this area... or in this world."

He turned to one of his subordinates and said, "Clean up the area. Are there any witnesses?"

"Yes, Inspector. We have them in custody."

"Keep them isolated for now. People are panicky enough without learning about these massacres." He gave the officer a stern look. "That goes for the police as well. There had better not be any loose tongues."

The young policeman gulped nervously. "Yes SIR!"

"I have some matters to investigate before returning to Kyoto." And with those words, Saitoh turned and disappeared into the surrounding forest.

As he silently made his way through the woods, he felt oddly comfortable amid the great trees. It was like he had been here many times before.... Saitoh shook off that odd fancy, then suddenly

scowled as he sensed the presence of creatures that had no rightful place in this world.

He had a duty to destroy such trespassers.

And duty was something Saitoh Hajime understood very, very well.

He paused to listen... then leapt aside just as a tall, gangling creature dropped from a nearby tree and attempted to smash him into the ground. His katana flashed and the monster howled in agony as both arms were neatly severed and went flying into the undergrowth. He sensed a presence behind him and dove to his left as the oversized claws of another monster barely missed him.

A quick glance around the clearing told him that he was facing at least five and easily more of the creatures. They looked like unnaturally gaunt alley dogs that walked on their back feet. Saliva and darkish foam dripped from their snarling muzzles as they circled cautiously, looking for an opportunity to pounce.

Saitoh answered with a soft snarl of his own. He was certain that he had found the monsters who had slaughtered the farming families in the area. An icy rage slowly seeped through his mind. These beasts would pay for intruding into his territory.

One of the bolder dog creatures lunged towards him. With a cold, vicious smile, he brought his sword parallel to the ground, slid his right hand forward along the blade,... then charged with a battle cry whose sheer ferocity made even these unnatural creatures cringe.

The Gatotsu strike nearly tore the lead attacker in half. Saitoh immediately followed up with a lethal cross-slash which left another beast thrashing on the ground, its bowels pouring from its ruptured belly.

The surviving beasts frantically scrambled away from the flashing blade. They had thought they had cornered a lone, puny human... easy prey. Two more members of their pack fell as it gradually penetrated their dim minds that they had bitten off much more than they could chew.

Another beast died. Then another.

The pack leader lashed out in rage, mixed with a hefty dose of panic, and managed to connect more by sheer luck than anything else. The wild blow sent Saitoh hurtling against an unyielding tree trunk. The survivors in the pack burst into triumphant howls as they watched the man sag to the ground, apparently knocked unconscious from the collision. They quickly converged, eager to drink the blood of this impudent human who had cut down so many of their fellow pack members. But even as they prepared to tear him to pieces, Saitoh abruptly lifted his head and stared at them with burning amber eyes.

He gave them a savage smile and bared his fangs.

The would-be predators had now become the prey.

And an ancient hunter once again prowled the great forests outside of

Kyoto.

-----

Back in Kyoto, as Tokio chatted and enjoyed a quiet cup of tea with her aunt Yuka, she suddenly paused in mid-word, then cocked her head slightly, as if listening to some distant sound.

Yuka noticed the mysterious little smile that appeared on her niece's lips and asked, "What was that all about?"

Tokio shrugged and calmly sipped her tea. "HE's awake," she said with a delicate emphasis on the pronoun.

Her plump little aunt raised her eyebrows and exclaimed, "Oh my!"

Risako suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Without preamble or apologies for her interruption, she said, "Mother, Father's...."

Tokio murmured, "Yes, dear. I know. Why don't you go take a look?"

As Risako disappeared as abruptly as she had appeared, Yuka twittered, "That girl takes after her sire so much, it's positively frightening."

-----

Aoshi slowly sagged to his knees, gasping for air. "The battle had been brutal and exhausting. Barely able to think or move from the pain in his body, he had fought more by instinct than by rational thought. Knowing that he couldn't possibly deal with so many opponents in his present condition, he had attacked first, hoping to whittle down the number of monsters to a more manageable number. The lesser members of the monsters had fallen early in the battle, leaving him to face the much deadlier leader.

The resulting fight had been a blur of attack and evasion, slash and counter-slash as they danced amid the great forest trees... a grim, stalking game that pitted demonic talons against the steel of his kodachi. All the while, he was desperately aware that vital seconds and minutes were slipping by....

Blood had flowed freely on both sides, but finally the demon beast had overreached itself. With the last bits of his strength, he had used the Kaiten Kenbu Rokuren to rip the beast to pieces, with the final stroke decapitating the grotesque creature.

As he struggled to simply stay conscious, he thought, (I have to get up. Misao can't possibly handle Kaoru and Kinslayer by herself. Get up, damn you!) he swore at himself.

"Even crippled with pain that would slay an ordinary man, you're as deadly as ever. You're a magnificent killing machine, Aoshi," a familiar female voice purred.

(Kaoru... no, Junichi! What is she doing back here?)

A horrible sense of dread began to grow in Aoshi's dazed mind as an inner voice started to whisper, 'Too late. Too late.' He lifted his head and gasped out, "What... have you... done to... Misao?"

Kaoru emerged from the shadows, her hands empty and Kinslayer innocently resting in its sheath over her shoulder. She didn't answer him immediately, but stepped delicately over the corpses until she reached the decapitated body of the monster leader.

As she bent down and lifted something off the ground, she said with a low chuckle, "I don't think you should be worrying about what I've done."

"What are you talking...?"

His voice trailed off as Kaoru held up the object she had picked up off the ground. The round, melon-sized object dangled from her grasp by a thin rope or cord. Even as he watched, the ground under the object steadily darkened as blood dripped from the severed head... for that's what the round object undoubtedly was. As Kaoru steadily approached, Aoshi's gaze focused not on the head which was obscured by the gathering shadows, but on the thin, dark rope that suspended it in midair.

....a rope that had an unmistakable sheen even in the dim light....

"You should be asking what YOU've done, Shinomori Aoshi."

....a thin rope of silk....

....or a braid of fine black hair.

-----

Standing outside his lonely hut, Hiko abruptly stiffened as he heard a low, harsh roar echo through the mountains. It sounded like the howl of an enraged beast....

....or the scream of a tormented soul.

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> (end of part 19) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: Keep repeating to yourself, "This is not a darkfic.  
This is NOT a darkfic." =^\_ ^=

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## 7. Parts 20-21

Rurouni Kenshin - "That Which Lingers" (Parts 20-21) by Madamhydra

This story is set in my own ALTERNATE REALITY Rurouni Kenshin universe which I've called "The Nightwitch Tales" -- think of it as Rurouni Kenshin mixed with various supernatural and paranormal elements. ^ Other stories in this alternate reality are: "Night Visitor"; "All in the Family"; and "Romancing the Wolf".

It takes place after the end of the Kyoto story arc. ^ After that, all bets are off. ^ Elements of the Revenge story arc may show up in the story.

WARNING: ^ This story is "semi-dark" -- it has dark elements (violence, profanity, etc.) but it's not a darkfic! ^ Actually, there's

> quite a bit of romance in it.... ^ ^ ^ ^ ^\_- <p>

As always, C&C is greatly appreciated! ^ ^ ^\_-^

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>

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> Part 20: ^ TRANSFORMATIONS

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> Text Conventions<br> ( ^ ) are character thoughts  
> / and // // represent various sorts of mental dialogue  
> \* ----- \* ----- \* ^ marks the start/end of dreams or flashbacks  
> [ ] denote visual or time notes  
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\*\*\*\*\*

[ Kyoto, mid-August, 1878 (11th year of the Meiji period) ]

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About a half an hour before Aoshi's horrified discovery, Misao was wandering around an unfamiliar area frantically searching for any trace of him.

One minute, they had been walking side by side along the shadowy forest path... the next instant, a thick, cold mist had rolled across the pathway, obscuring everything.

As the mist gradually thinned, Misao peered around wildly as she realized that Aoshi was nowhere in sight. "She fought down the urge to run around shouting his name."

(Damn it, girl. "You're a ninja. "Stealth, secrecy, and all that stuff. "Keep it quiet. "You've been alone in the woods by yourself before.)

But there was something strange about these forests... something uncanny.

She paused a moment, listening hard for any trace of sound. "Nothing. "Then again, she was looking for Aoshi. "Of course, he wouldn't make any noise.

Misao scowled. "Great. "How do two expert ninjas find each other in a great big forest?" "She suddenly grinned, then whistled the low, haunting call of a forest bird. "The little trill at the end would tell an Oniwabanshuu that another member was in the area. "She listened intently, but heard no response.

"What a charming sound."

Misao jumped, then whirled around to see a slim female figure emerging from the shadows. "The ninja girl had no trouble recognizing her.

"KAORU!?"

Misao then caught sight of the hideously familiar sword hanging over Kaoru's shoulder. "In a sick voice, she whispered, "Kinslayer."

"Ah, I see that you've discovered the name of my sword."

The ninja girl glared at Kaoru and said, "You're Minobe Junichi, aren't you? "What have you done with Kaoru!?"

"I really think that you have more important things to worry about."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Shinomori, for example."

Misao clenched her fists and hissed, "What have you done to Aoshi!?"

"Oh, it's just 'Aoshi' now, is it? "No more 'Aoshi-sama'? "Just what have you been up to, little girl?" "Junichi shrugged Kaoru's shoulders and said, "At this very moment, he's probably fighting for his life... and losing."

"You're lying! He can't lose! He's better than anything you can throw at him!"

"That might be true IF he was in peak condition. As you should well know, he hasn't been feeling his best recently."

"Where is he!?" Misao whipped her head back and forth, searching for any sign of Aoshi, but she saw and heard nothing. "Damn you, Minobe! Where IS he!?"

A mocking smile appeared on Kaoru's lips. "And even if I did tell you where he is, what could you do? If Shinomori can't handle my creatures, what makes you think that a half-trained ninja like yourself can? And you with a broken arm, too."

Misao growled, practically speechless with rage. But inside, she had the sickening feeling that Minobe Junichi was right. What could she do? She shook her head furiously and shouted, "Shut up! Just shut up!"

"You know I'm right. Face it, you're just not good enough," Junichi said, his voice -- or rather, Kaoru's voice -- dripping with malice.

Misao tensed as Kaoru unsheathed Kinslayer, but instead of attacking the ninja girl, Kaoru simply held the blade by her side and made no threatening motions.

Simmering with fury, Misao growled, "So, what do you want from me?"

"I'm here to give you the chance to save your precious Aoshi-sama's life. It's a very simple deal. I'll spare his life for a little of your blood."

Misao blinked, then spat out, "If you want my blood so badly, why don't you just take it!? A half-trained ninja girl should hardly be any trouble for a 'great' swordsman like yourself!"

Junichi shrugged carelessly. "I'm not in the mood to go chasing you around. Just give me some of your blood and Shinomori lives." Kaoru lifted the blade and extended it, the sharp tip of the blade hovered just a few feet away from Misao.

(It's a trick! It has to be! If Junichi went through all this trouble to separate and ambush the two of us, he can't be willing to just let either of us go in exchange for a little blood from me! But... but if I don't do it, Aoshi could die!)

Misao was half-reaching for the sword tip when she abruptly remembered Takagi Asuko's warning from the night before.

(Asuko specifically warned me that Kinslayer has power over the people it injures through their blood! That must be how it possessed Kaoru without her even touching the blade. And that's how it hurt Aoshi back at the clinic! Somehow, after tasting their blood, it now has the power to control them! Oh my god! If Kinslayer can do THOSE things to people whose blood it takes without their consent, what can it do to someone who surrenders their blood

voluntarily!?)

Misao immediately snatched her hand back and hastily retreated.

Junichi said impatiently, "Don't waste time, you stupid girl. The longer you wait, the more likely that Shinomori will die a slow and painful death."

In a low, anger-choked voice, Misao said, "You bastard! You had no intention of letting either Aoshi or me go! You were planning to trick me into voluntarily offering my blood to Kinslayer so you could make me into another one of your puppets! Is that it? And what were you going to force me to do once I was under your control?"

An angry scowl flashed across Kaoru's face. Junichi snarled, "You're too damn clever for your own good, girl. You're quite right. Since Kamiya didn't consent to having her blood drawn by Kinslayer, I can only go so far with her. You, on the other hand.... I could do a lot more with you."

Misao shuddered as she saw the cruel smile that distorted Kaoru's face.

Junichi continued, "Your knowledge changes nothing. The deal still stands. Surrender yourself to me or Shinomori dies!"

Misao again slowly lifted her hand toward Kinslayer, then a memory flashed through her mind....

\* \* \*

A clearing just outside of Tokyo. While his life's blood slowly soaks into the rich soil of the forest, Aoshi smiles at her... REALLY smiles at her as he whispers, "Misao... you're... back...."

\* \* \*

And another, much more recent memory....

Misao thought, (He told me, 'Don't let that cursed sword win after all you've been through. Don't allow despair to destroy what you are.' Aoshi risked his life to free me from Kinslayer's spell. He risked his life to bring me back to myself... to the person that he and all my friends care about.)

And somewhere deep in herself, Misao found the strength... not the strength to cling blindly, but the strength to accept the decisions and choices of others despite the cost to herself.

She felt a terrible ache in her chest, almost as if her heart was ripping in two. Perhaps it was as she slowly lowered her hand for the last time. With her head hanging low, Misao spoke in a shaky, but utterly determined voice.

"No. I refuse your devil's bargain."

Junichi looked startled, then snarled viciously, "So, you DON'T care enough about him to...."

Misao lifted her head and stared directly into Junichi's eyes. Tears slowly ran down her cheeks as she said, "I love him, more than you can possibly understand. Aoshi fought and risked his life to free me from the spell of hatred and rage that consumed me."

Her blue eyes glittered with fury as she continued, "If I simply give in and surrender to Kinslayer's power without even a struggle, I dishonor him. It cheapens all the pain he's suffered, all the blood he's shed, and all the sacrifices he's made."

Misao's body trembled, then she screamed, "I WILL NOT PERMIT THAT TO HAPPEN!!!" She gasped for air before adding in a frighteningly even voice, "He is Shinomori Aoshi, the Okashira of the Oniwabanshuu, and the man I love. I will not squander the gift he has chosen to give me at such a great cost to himself."

Junichi stared at her, momentarily stunned. From the confused expression on Kaoru's face, it was as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

She tossed her head defiantly. "So, Junichi. You can have my blood, if you want it so badly, but only by force. Believe me when I tell you that I won't make it easy for you." She tensed, ready for action.

"I... see." Junichi shook Kaoru's head in frustration, apparently unable to believe that he had misjudged her so badly. He snapped Kaoru's fingers and a pack of low, squat shapes collected at her feet.

"Very well, then I have no use for you."

The hairless, pale beasts were an incredibly ugly cross between a pig and a dog -- heavily muscled, with massive claws on their short legs and gaping mouths full of long, vicious tusks.

It was easy for Misao to guess Junichi's intentions. One look at the pack of beasts and she took off without waiting for Junichi to finish his threats. Several seconds passed before he recovered from his surprise and set the monsters on her trail.

The shrubs and small branches left long, red welts all over Misao's body and face as she ran for her life. The short-legged creatures crashed through the undergrowth after her with a surprising turn of speed, but she had not been idly boasting about her foot speed when she had first encountered Himura Kenshin on the road to Kyoto. She managed to stay ahead of the pack, but not by much. If the monsters managed to catch her, she was as good as dead. With her broken arm, she knew that she had no chance of fending them off.

She burst out into a clear area, only realizing too late that there was a deep stream bed just over the slight rise. Her left foot landed on empty air and she flailed wildly as she tumbled into the gully. The heavy impact of the fall drove the breath from her lungs. It took her several precious seconds before she managed to regain her wits. She turned over only to see several of the beasts perched at the upper edge of the gully, preparing to pounce down on her. Misao frantically rolled aside at the very last second and

felt the ground shake as one of the pig-dogs just missed stomping on her head.

She leapt to her feet, only to scream as her head was brutally wrenched backward by her braid.    For a terrified second, she thought her neck was about to snap.    Misao twisted aside in a frantic attempt to avoid the monster's raking claws as she tried to pull herself free, but the beast's grip on her hair was too tight.    Without a second thought, her right hand drew Asuko's tanto and slashed.    The razor sharp blade sheared effortlessly through her thick hair.    In the process, Misao actually nicked her own ear in her desperate hurry to free herself.    She then lashed out with a vicious kick that sent the first monster crashing into the other members of the pack.    As the creatures struggled to sort themselves out, Misao scrambled up the opposite side of the gully and dashed into the forest.

Junichi burst into the clearing just in time to see Misao disappearing from view while his monsters squealed furiously at each other.

"You fools!    Get moving!    I want her head...!    Wait!"    Junichi snatched the long braid of black hair from one of the pig-dogs, then slowly smiled as another, even better scheme suddenly popped into his mind.    He chuckled ominously.

Fondling the heavy, silky braid now in Kaoru's hands, Junichi kicked the monsters on their way.    After warning them not to return until they killed Misao in the most painful way possible, Junichi headed back in the direction from whence he came.

Back to Shinomori Aoshi.

-----  
> ----- <p>

After being an unwilling witness to Junichi's brutal deception using Misao's braid, Kaoru ranted and raved, but to absolutely no effect.

(Junichi, what kind of monster are you!!!    How could you do such a thing to another human being!?)

Junichi totally ignored her, like he always did.    

She shuddered.    By the gods, the sheer, calculated cruelty of it....    She would never forget the look on Aoshi's face when he recognized what she had been holding in her hand.

(I was so wrong to consider him cold and unfeeling.    If he didn't care... no, if he didn't LOVE Misao, he never would have reacted the way he did.)

She wanted to shout that it was a lie, a great big lie, but even if she could have said the words aloud, she was afraid that Aoshi wouldn't have heard her.    By that time, he had long since disappeared into some personal hell of his own.    No doubt with ample assistance from Junichi -- or rather, from Kinslayer.

With seething bitterness, Kaoru hissed, (DAMN you, Junichi, for your

damned mind games!)

She abruptly froze as she sensed the stirring of that mysterious second presence contained within the sword. Â

(I'm such an idiot! Â What happened to Aoshi.... Â Junichi couldn't POSSIBLY have thought up something so... so perfectly CRUEL. Â Not by himself, anyway.)

By this time, she had become painfully familiar with Junichi's thought patterns. Â He was consumed by hatred, arrogant beyond belief... and not terribly bright. Â

Actually, he could be considered a bit stupid.

(All this intricate planning... all these vicious games with Kenshin, Aoshi, and Saitoh... everything that's been going on. Â It's simply too well planned. Â Too sophisticated. Â Junichi's like a spoiled brat. Â If he wants something, he wants it NOW. Â After being forced to wait for thirteen years, there's no way he'd have the patience for all these schemes. Â So what's really going on!?)

At that moment, a hideous image sprang into Kaoru's mind.

....Junichi moving her body like a puppeteer....

....and in the shadows behind Junichi, someone -- or someTHING -- manipulating HIM....

And the true puppetmaster of this entire horror show was laughing.

-----

Misao had gained some valuable distance after escaping the gully, but the demon beasts chasing her were tireless. Â She was rapidly losing ground as exhaustion took its toll. Â Misao suddenly heard a distant scream... the scream of some horribly wounded animal. Â She instinctively turned to check behind her, and failed to notice the sudden change in the terrain. Â Without warning, she fell, rolling down a slight slope before crashing head-first into something big, solid, and hard.

She had managed not to cut herself on her tanto as she skidded and rolled downhill, but that was the only piece of good luck in the whole mess. Â When she tried to sit up, she very nearly passed out.

(Owww. Â Damn. Â Can't just lie here. Â Got to get up....)

As Misao whoozily pulled herself to her knees, she heard her pursuers rapidly approaching. Â With her back against a huge, vertical slab of stone, there was nowhere for her to go. Â To make matters worse, she was unarmed except for the tanto -- she had used all her kunai during the chase. Â Misao wiped the blood from her eyes, tightened her grip on the weapon, and braced herself for attack.

The pig-dogs were just cresting the top of the slope when a low ominous growl filled the air. Â The monsters skidded to an abrupt

halt. Misao blinked in confusion as expressions of terror and panic contorted their bestial faces. They slowly began to back away, squealing and snuffling wildly.

Chills suddenly ran down her own spine as she heard the unmistakable howl of a wolf. And it came from somewhere very close.

The eerie, echoing cry was the last straw. Their morale utterly broken, her pursuers turned tail and fled for their lives.

Almost too afraid to look for herself, Misao glanced very, very slowly to her left and couldn't believe her eyes.

Less than ten feet away, on a rocky outcrop, stood a great wolf.

A HUGE wolf that glowed with a dark blue fire.

A wolf she could actually see THROUGH.

The last thing Misao remembered before she passed out was the gleam of the wolf's cold amber eyes....

-----  
In the mountains east of Kyoto, Hiko Seijuro stepped into a clearing littered with monster corpses. As he coolly looked around for clues, he abruptly stiffened as he heard a howl echoing among the mountains.

"Hmph. So the Hunter is back," he muttered.

Hiko turned as he detected several creatures clumsily crashing through the underbrush. They were obviously headed in his direction. He smiled to himself and murmured, "So it seems that there are some monsters left for me."

He calmly waited. Sure enough, within a minute or so, a horde of squat, brutish pig-like monsters burst into the open area. They were more interested in running away from the source of the howl than in attacking, but Hiko was not about to let a pack of demon creatures go roaming about at will.

Even in the dimly lit forest, the steel of his blade glittered. And when the flashes faded, there were fifteen more monster corpses strewn about the clearing and a man in a white cape leisurely sheathing his sword.

The contemptuous, raucous call of a raven shattered the quiet.

Hiko whirled around and glared up into a nearby tree. Even as he watched, the raven hopped down from a high tree branch. By the time it landed on the ground, the large bird had become an austere-looking woman dressed in a loose, black kimono.

"Risako." Hiko looked less than pleased by her presence.

She gave him an icy smile in return. "Hiko."



"What are you doing here?" he snapped irritably.

Her amber eyes narrowed at his tone. "That's really none of your business."

"It is when you go tramping through my neck of the woods."

"They're hardly YOUR woods. This is Father's territory and you well know it." She bared her teeth slightly as if daring him to challenge her statement.

Hiko shrugged carelessly. "He never seemed to mind my presence."

"Or maybe you're simply not worth his attention," she murmured, a malicious gleam in her eyes.

He snorted and said, "So what are you doing in Kyoto?"

She returned his careless shrug.

Hiko's eyes suddenly narrowed. "Don't try to tell me that you're finally taking an interest in Kenshin, not after abandoning him all those years ago."

Risako glared at him. "As I said, it's not your business."

"It is if it involves my student. After all, YOU deserted him."

She narrowed her eyes and growled, "I was not about to let Masaki's murderers go free!"

"So you dumped your newborn baby on some poor peasant family while you were off indulging in murder and mayhem."

"Don't sound so self-righteous, Hiko. You have no concept of my feelings on this matter. And while we're on the subject, what took YOU so long to find Kenshin?"

Hiko gave her a nasty look. "I was travelling during that time. I didn't even know Masaki left a son until I ran into a group of bandits who were about to kill a small, red-haired, violet-eyed boy." He shrugged, then added, "Maybe it's just as well you didn't raise Kenshin. I shudder to think what sort of mother you would've made."

Risako leaned forward and snapped, "As if YOU had any more experience in raising children?"

Hiko leaned forward himself and replied acidly, "I could hardly do a worse job than you. At least I taught him a sense of self-worth, which is more than you would have done. I know your general opinion of men all too well, Risako. The thing that really astonishes me is that you ever managed to put those feelings aside long enough to fall in love with my best friend and have his child."

"Leave my husband Masaki out of this," Risako said in an ominous voice.

Hiko gave her a chilly smile. "Make me."

The angry tension between the two was abruptly broken by the arrival of a small owl. It flashed between them and perched on Risako's shoulder. It hooted briefly before silently gliding away.

She flicked her long silky hair over her shoulders and said, "I don't have time to waste arguing with a fool like you, Hiko." With a graceful sweep of her long, black sleeves, Risako was gone and a large black raven winged its way back toward Kyoto.

Hiko watched her until she disappeared, then twitched his cloak back in place.

"Hmph. With a mother like that, it's no wonder my idiot pupil can be so damn obstinate at times."

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> ----- <p>

Kenshin, Sano, and Yahiko ended up spending the next several hours searching the Minobe house from top to bottom, looking for any clues that could help them to defeat and destroy Kinslayer. It was a particularly infuriating experience because of the old woman's presence. Not trusting Emi out of their sight, they were forced to drag the uncooperative woman along as they examined every single room in the house.

After the first ten minutes, Sano was convinced that the old crone was stark raving mad. One moment, she'd be cringing at the slightest sound or harsh word, but the next moment, she'd be screaming epithets and obscenities at Kenshin.

The repeated outbursts certainly didn't help Kenshin's mood at all. But when she finally switched to recounting stories of the Hitokiri Battousai's murders, real or imaginary, that's when Sano really started to get worried as he watched the redhead's expression become colder and colder.

For the first few stories, Yahiko had tried arguing with Emi, but Kenshin had put his hand on the outraged boy's shoulder and gently said, "Don't waste your energy, Yahiko. Nothing will convince her that she's wrong. Let's concentrate on finding something that might help Kaoru."

That brief flash of the Kenshin they knew was enough to bring a faint smile to Yahiko's worried face and gave the boy the determination to ignore Emi's ramblings. However, he couldn't keep himself from glaring at the old woman when she started on an incoherent story about some massacre that was too outlandish to be believed.

The boy stared nastily at Emi and thought, (The Battousai may have killed dozens of people... maybe even more. But I damn well know that he didn't kill for the sheer fun of it, you ugly old bitch!).

However, when she started mumbling about a tragic incident involving a young couple and a bloody disaster of a wedding ceremony, Kenshin's patience finally snapped. The swordsman turned to Sano and said very evenly, "Sano, I don't care how you do it, but keep her quiet."

Before the fighter could object, Kenshin added, "If you don't, then I'll shut her up myself." Â Despite the apparent lack of emotion of his friend's voice, Sano was pretty sure he detected a faint, pleading tone. Â

Sano thought, (That last story really touched a nerve, didn't it? Â In his current state of mind, I've got no idea what Kenshin might do... and I think he's not entirely sure himself, either.)

Unwilling to test his friend's tenuous self-control, the fighter hastily said, "Don't worry, Kenshin. Â I'll handle it. Â Why don't you go ahead to the next room, okay?" Â As Kenshin silently exited the chamber, Sano turned around and nearly bumped into Yahiko. Â The boy silently held up several torn strips of cloth.

"Thanks, Yahiko."

"No problem."

Sano took the cloth strips and advanced on Emi, who gave him a contemptuous stare.

"You wouldn't!" she screeched in fury.

The fighter smiled grimly. Â "Listen, you damn bitch. Â Normally I don't beat up on people weaker than myself. Â And normally, I would be the very LAST person to agree with Saitoh Hajime. Â However, in this case, I think I'm going to make an exception."

That morning, he had been both shocked and infuriated to realize that Saitoh was perfectly willing to threaten and possibly torture an old woman for information. Â He had been equally upset that Kenshin had been perfectly willing to let Saitoh proceed without interference. Â But after listening to Emi boast about using Kinslayer to get her revenge for nearly three straight hours, he had lost all sympathy for the old woman.

(You damn bitch. Â No remorse. Â Not a single scrap of remorse. Â You bloody well KNEW what would happen if the demon in that cursed sword woke up. Â And you didn't give a damn, did you? Â You planted a bomb and you didn't care how many people would get hurt when it finally went off!)

Sano growled, "Your brother, husband, your sons... they knew what they were doing! Â Anyone who fought in the Douran knew the risks involved! Â You really think that getting revenge this way would fix anything? Â All you're doing is dishonoring their memory!"

Emi spat out, "How can you possibly understand what it's like to lose everyone that matters to you...!"

"You're not the only person who's lost their entire family, you stupid old hag!!!" shouted Yahiko in the old woman's face. Â "You don't see me sitting around and moaning about it! Â It hurts like hell but you don't see me taking it out on the whole world! Â I managed to find a new home... a new family... people to care about! Â And now because of your crazy scheme for revenge, I could lose all

of that!" Â

For a brief instant, Sano was afraid that Yahiko was about to kick the old woman, but the boy barely managed to restrain himself. Â The boy took a few deep breaths, then muttered, "I'm going to help Kenshin," before stalking out of the room.

Staring after Yahiko, Sano thought, (Sometimes I think you're way smarter than me, kid. Â You pretty much figured all this out on your own. Â Kenshin had to pound ME into the ground before I realized that I wasn't doing anybody any good by sitting around brooding about past injustices and loved ones lost.)

The fighter stared down at the sullen old woman and said quietly, "I can understand the desire for revenge... how the hatred eats at your guts. Â And unlike the kid, I let the whole world know it."

A sly look appeared on Emi's face. Â "Then you of all people...."

Sano stared at the old woman and gritted his teeth. Â "But unlike you, I don't expect -- or want -- innocent people to suffer just because I'm unhappy. Â That's what I think Kenshin finds really unforgivable. Â If you went after him alone, I don't think he would've minded. Â But both you and your nephew Junichi had to involve totally innocent people in this feud. Â Not just Kaoru, but all those murdered people in Tokyo and now everyone in this entire city."

"You don't understand...", she whined, strangely unnerved by the scathing contempt she saw in Sano's eyes.

"No, I don't understand how you feel... and I really don't want to."  
Â

With those words, Sano briskly stuffed a wadded up strip of cloth into Emi's mouth, then proceeded to tie her arms and legs.

-----  
After nearly four hours of painstaking work, Kenshin and his companions had precious little to show for all their efforts. Â Emi had reluctantly pointed out her sources of information -- a pitiful handful of tattered, ancient scrolls which were all written in some odd dialect or code. Â Hopefully, Tokio or her grand-aunt Asuko would be able to make sense of the documents.

As Sano untied Emi and removed her gag, the first thing the infuriated old woman said was, "Don't worry about that precious whore of yours, she's already here in Kyoto...." Emi suddenly went quiet as she remembered that her nephew had explicitly warned her not to reveal his -- or Kaoru's -- presence in the city.

Kenshin reacted instantly by grabbing Emi's kimono and hauling her off the ground.

"Where is she?" he said softly.

Emi nervously stared into Kenshin's pale eyes which seemed to flicker

between an icy purple and a pale gold. "If she didn't tell him, who knew what the Battousai might do to her. And despite her consuming desire for revenge, she still wanted to live very badly. But if she did tell the Battousai what he wanted to know, Junichi would make her pay for her loose tongue. The stress was too much for the old woman and she fainted.

"Kenshin, is she...?"

The red-haired swordsman casually dropped her to the floor with a thud. "No, Sano. She's just passed out for the moment." He turned to Yahiko and said, "Get some cold water...."

The house servant peered into the room and said in a shaky voice, "Please, that's not necessary! The young woman the mistress spoke of... she was here, but she left hours ago."

Kenshin snapped, "Where did she go?"

"I... I don't know! All I know is that she slipped out of the house just after the police inspector left! I have no idea where she went!"

Kenshin simply stared at the trembling, mid-aged woman. She collapsed on the floor and wailed, "Truly I don't! She muttered something about it being Saitoh's turn. That's all! Please don't kill me! Please!!!"

Sano saw his friend inhale sharply and asked, "What's wrong, Kenshin?"

"Of course... Saitoh's turn," the redhead murmured softly.

Yahiko yelped, "What about Saitoh!?"

"Junichi took Kaoru away from me. Now it's Saitoh's turn... to lose the woman he loves," said Kenshin in a bleak voice.

"Oh no. Tokyo...," a horrified Sano whispered.

"Exactly. Come on."

Kenshin, Sano, and Yahiko ran out of the Minobe house, leaving behind an unconscious old woman and a terrified house servant.

-----

The encounter was probably inevitable. As Kenshin, Sano, and Yahiko raced around a street corner, they abruptly confronted by a group of Shinsengumi swordsmen. Kenshin put his hand on the hilt of his sakabatou and sharply said to Sano and Yahiko, "Stay back. I'll deal with this."

Before the fighter and the boy could protest, one of the Shinsengumi bawled, "The Battousai!" As one, the squad of swordsmen charged.

Kenshin drew his sakabatou and lunged to meet their attack. He effortlessly swept the first attacker aside. The second swordsman

was better. ^ It took two strokes to take him down. ^ And so it went....

Sano thought, (They can't be real! ^ Except for Saitoh, the Shinsengumi don't exist anymore!) ^ He jumped aside as one of Kenshin's opponents skidded past the red-haired swordsman and practically landed at Sano's and Yahiko's feet. ^ As the dazed Shinsengumi tried to stand up, Yahiko whacked him on the head with his shinai. ^

After watching the man collapse to the ground, the boy then turned to Sano and said nervously, "They're supposed to be ghosts, aren't they? ^ I mean... all the Shinsengumi are dead, right? ^ They're not real...."

But as Sano reached down and prodded the Shinsengumi that Yahiko had knocked unconscious, the fighter wasn't so sure. ^ The guy certainly FELT real enough. ^ His flesh was warm and he was breathing.

"Like hell if I know, Yahiko." ^

Sano watched as one of the swordsmen missed Kenshin's head and cut a great gash into a wooden fence. ^ The man paid dearly for the mistake when Kenshin smashed him across the throat with his sakabatou, sending his opponent crashing to the ground, choking and gagging.

(He isn't holding back at all! ^ Damn, if it wasn't for the fact he was using a reversed blade, Kenshin would be slaughtering them....) ^

Almost as if Sano's thought had been the trigger, it happened.

In a single frozen instant of time, the entire world seemed to dim, then something seemed to... shift.

....change....

....twist....

....flip....

To Sano, it was if reality itself took a sudden step sideways.

Then the strangeness was gone and everything began to move normally again. ^ As he tried to figure out what the hell had just happened, the fighter watched Kenshin finish his swordstroke. ^ The redhead's opponent collapsed to the ground in a spray of blood....

(WHAT THE HELL!?)

Sano could only stare in total stupefaction as a puddle of blood steadily oozed from under the fallen Shinsengumi. ^ Something warm and wet ran down the fighter's cheek. ^ Sano reached up and wiped at the dampness, then stared in horror at the smear of blood on his fingertips.

Jerking his gaze back to the fight, he numbly watched as Kenshin sliced open an opponent's belly and in the same downward stroke, severed another opponent's leg. ^ Bright red blood filled the air and

stained the nearby walls.

In a choked voice, he heard Yahiko's horrified whisper.

"Kenshin's sakabatou...."

Sano's gaze flew to his friend's sword... and he couldn't believe his eyes.   

(No.    It's impossible!)

Arai Shakku's final masterpiece, the Sakabatou Shinuchi, was a sakabatou no more.

Somehow, in mid-battle, between one second and another, Kenshin's sword had become a katana....

"KENSHIN!!!" Sano screamed.

Kenshin noted the shouting in the background, but ignored it for the moment.    He recognized the swordsmen facing him.    They had fallen once before under his blade.

They would do so again.

There were three more Shinsengumi charging toward him... then there were two... and then there were none.

The last of the Shinsengumi fell before Sano or Yahiko could overcome their paralysis.    They could only mutely watch as Kenshin... no, the Battousai coldly surveyed the surrounding carnage.

After a long moment, Kenshin abruptly blinked, then his eyes widened in shock as he lifted the katana in his hand and watched as the blood ran down the blade.    As he stared aghast at the dark red droplets staining the once pristine blue ribbon wrapped on his wrist, a familiar female voice suddenly spoke.

"So, now that you have a proper sword again, tell me.    How does it feel to be slicing through flesh for the first time in over a decade, hm?"

Sano and Yahiko yelped, "Kaoru!?"

Kenshin slowly lifted his head and glared, his pale eyes glittering with barely suppressed rage.   

"No.    Not Kaoru.    Minobe Junichi."

Kaoru and Kenshin stared at each other across a blood-soaked street.

....a woman imprisoned inside her own body....

....a man ensnared within his own mind and memories....

-----

Inside her body, Kaoru quietly wept.

(Kenshin. ^ Oh my god. ^ Kenshin....)

She suddenly gave herself a mental smack in the face.

(Stupid girl! ^ I can't just curl up and die. ^ I have to be strong.  
^ ^ Whether he's the Hitokiri Battousai or Himura Kenshin, it doesn't  
make a difference. ^ He's still the man I love, damn it! ^ I won't  
let him go!)

-----  
Somewhere, deeply buried beneath the icy persona of the Battousai,  
Kenshin breathed a silent sigh of relief. ^ Junichi might be in  
control of Kaoru's body, but he could see the silent desperation in  
her eyes... and the fierce determination. ^ ^ Although trapped, Kaoru  
was still herself. ^ Junichi hadn't managed to touch her mind and  
soul... at least, not yet.

-----  
Using Kaoru's body, Junichi pouted. ^ "You don't seem that surprised  
to see me."

The Battousai flicked his sword, casting off the last remaining drops  
of blood, and said coldly, "Your aunt told us of your arrival in  
Kyoto."

Junichi snarled, "That stupid old bitch! ^ I warned her to keep her  
mouth shut! ^ How dare she cross me in such a manner!?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I just had to see my old enemy the Battousai finally reemerge.  
^ How did you like that last little touch with the sword?" ^ Junichi  
made an evil smile appear on Kaoru's face. ^ "That's only a small  
sample of what I can do now."

"Then why go through this farce with the ghosts and dreams? ^ Destroy  
me if you can," the Battousai demanded.

"Oh no. ^ That would be TOO easy. ^ I want to meet you, sword to  
sword. ^ It's only fair. ^ After all, I want the world to know who's  
really the best swordsman."

Sano finally found his voice. ^ "Fair!? ^ How can any of this  
possibly be considered FAIR!?" ^ However, both Junichi and the  
Battousai totally ignored him.

"Then let's settle this, here and now." ^ The Battousai slowly  
sheathed his sword.

An angry look flitted across Kaoru's face. ^ "NO. ^ I choose the time  
and the place. ^ Besides, it wouldn't feel right without Saitoh's  
participation. ^ He hasn't gotten my real invitation, yet."

The Battousai's eyes abruptly narrowed. ^ "What have you done to  
Tokio?"

Junichi smirked and exclaimed, "Oh, now I understand your earlier



question! "You were wondering why I'm not chasing after Tokio!" A wild snicker erupted from Kaoru's throat. "You should be flattered! I wanted to deal with you personally, so I'm going to let my messenger do the dirty work."

"Messenger?"

"None other than the former Okashira of the Oniwabanshuu."

Yahiko hissed, "What the hell are you SAYING!?"

In a low, harsh voice, the Battousai demanded, "What have you done to Aoshi?"

Kaoru -- or rather, Junichi -- threw her head back and laughed.

"Such a passionate man, under all that ice. Oh, I simply showed him what it feels like to kill the woman he loves." Junichi chuckled. "He did the rest to himself."

Yahiko and Sano exchanged frantic looks. The boy babbled, "Does Junichi mean who and what I think he means!?"

Sano muttered, "I'm not sure. I can't imagine that cold fish in love with ANYBODY. But unless Aoshi's been keeping another woman on the side... who else could it possibly be except the Weasel Girl!?"

Junichi went on to say, "Sometimes I surprise even myself with my creativity. The idea just... popped into my head."

A low growling noise disrupted Junichi's boasting. He paused and looked a bit startled.

At first Sano couldn't locate the source of that unnerving sound, but a shiver ran down his spine as he realized it was coming from Kenshin.

The Battousai was literally quivering with rage as he glared at Junichi with golden eyes that glowed with fury. Then without another word, he lunged toward Kaoru, sword in hand.

For an instant, Junichi seemed stunned by the Battousai's infuriated reaction, then a look of crazed amusement appeared on Kaoru's face. She turned and fled with a taunting laugh, with Kenshin in hot pursuit.

Sano and Yahiko immediately ran after them, but keeping up with Kenshin turned out to be a hopeless task as they lost sight of their two friends within seconds.

As they stood in the deserted street, Sano gasped, "Damn. There's no way we can catch up. Not with the way Kaoru and Kenshin are moving."

Yahiko propped himself against a building and panted, "Oh great! Kaoru's possessed, Kenshin's turned back into the Battousai, and now the two of them are playing hide-and-seek in the streets of Kyoto! What the hell do we do now!?"

"If we can't do anything about Kenshin and Kaoru... maybe there's something else we CAN do."

"Like what?"

"We have to find and warn Tokio."

-----

At the Aoiya, Omasu stepped out of the kitchen just in time to see Aoshi walking down the hallway away from her.

"Aoshi-sama!"    

He stopped still, but didn't turn around.

"Yes?"

She then noticed the rips and dark splatters on his trenchcoat.  
  "What happened!?    Are you...?"

"It's nothing."

Omasu blinked at Aoshi's characteristically curt reply.    "Oh."    She glanced around.    "Where's Misao?"

There was a brief pause, then with no particular emotion, he said,  
"You might look in her room.    Where are the others?"

"Okina, Shuro, and Kuro are all out at the moment.    With so many weird things going on, everyone's busy investigating and checking out various reports.    Okon and I are the only ones here.    Oh, except for Tokio-san."

"....Tokio?"

"Yes, she wanted to drop off some documents for Himura-san."

"Where is she?"

"She's chatting with Okon in the upstairs sitting room."

"I see."    With those words, Aoshi continued on his way.

Omasu frowned slightly.    Was it her imagination or was he sounding a bit... odd?    She shook her head and returned to the kitchen.

(With all the strange things going on, it's no wonder that my imagination's starting to run wild.    I wonder if Misao's hungry?)

Upstairs, Aoshi paused outside the door to the sitting room.    He drew his two kodachi in a single, fluid motion, then proceeded to demolish the door and a large portion of the wall.    As the shattered remains of the doorway fell to the floor, he saw the two women seated inside.    Ignoring Okon as she gaped blankly at him, Aoshi focused his attention on his chosen target.

Saitoh Tokio.

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> (end of part 20) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: ^ The return of the shura. ^ ^ =^\_ ^=

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>

=====

> Part 21: ^ HIDDEN ASPECTS<br>

=====

[ Kyoto, mid-August, 1878 (11th year of the Meiji period) ]

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Misao felt cool stone beneath her cheek as she struggled back to consciousness. ^ As somebody uttered a familiar, contemptuous snort behind her back, she dazedly thought, (Sounds just like the psycho cop. ^ Hmmm... why on earth am I thinking about him... ohhh, my head....)

She abruptly remembered dashing wildly through the woods with Junichi's pet monsters hard on her heels... the sudden drop... crashing into a stone wall... then the monsters running away in terror....

(Because... because they saw....)

She sat bolt upright, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"That huge wolf!" Misao blurted out, then caught the faint flicker of blue out of the corner of her eye. ^ She turned her head just in time to see the translucent, shimmering form of the wolf disappear around the corner of a building.

Misao staggered to her feet and took a look at her surroundings. ^ She was standing in the courtyard in front of a modest shrine. ^ When she saw the old, barely legible sign propped against a tree, she realized that she had somehow landed smack in the middle of the very place that she and Aoshi had been looking for. ^

The shrine building was very old, but it was obvious that someone had been taking regular care of the place. ^ Misao jumped as she caught another glimpse of the ghostly wolf. ^ It sat near the corner of the shrine, its yellow eyes narrowed and its tail swishing impatiently. ^ As soon as she saw it, the spirit beast turned and disappeared around the building.

She stared at it blankly and thought, (Those eyes... they look just like....) ^ She shook her head sharply. ^ (No, that's crazy. ^ I'm just imagining things... but on the other hand....)

Misao stumbled after the beast, hoping to get a better look at it. Â She rounded the corner just in time to see it trot up a path behind the shrine. Â Some impulse urged her to follow. Â After passing through a short, forested stretch, she emerged along an open walkway roughly paved with slate. Â Along each side of the walkway were large tablets of stone, inscribed with writing. Â Off in the distance, at the far end of the ascending path, was a small flat area and the entrance to a cave. Â The cave obviously also served as a shrine, but it was much, much older than the manmade structure behind her. Â She watched as the flickering form of the wolf-spirit slipped into the cave entrance and vanished from sight. Â

-----

Hiko made his way along the shadowy forest path, then stopped suddenly and spoke.

"I just want to tell you that your daughter Risako is hell's own bitch."

Sitting atop a pile of stones just a few feet away from Hiko, the ghostly form of the great wolf grinned toothily, its shoulders shaking as if in silent laughter. Â It then cocked its head slightly in an inquisitive gesture, its amber eyes gleaming with a dark, inner fire.

Hiko glared at the beast with an odd mixture of respect and exasperation. Â

"And no, I wouldn't touch her with a ten foot pole. Â Do you think I'm crazy?"

The wolf-spirit narrowed its eyes in sly amusement, then vanished, leaving Hiko alone once more.

-----

When she reached the mouth of the cave, Misao warily peeked inside before entering. Â The interior was lit by crude stone firepots that burned with a cool, almost bluish flame. Â And by the flickering light of those fires, she could see that entire back wall of the cave was covered with the carving of a great wolf in profile -- its body lean but powerful, its jaws agape with long fangs plainly visible. Â The sight sent chills down Misao's spine.

"No wonder they call this spirit the Hunter-Killer...", she whispered, awestruck by the eerie magnificence of the stone carving and the primal spirit it represented.

Suddenly, the surface of the cave wall rippled like water. Â Before Misao's incredulous eyes, the great stone carving of the wolf came to life. Â It turned its head out of the wall and stared at her with those piercing amber eyes that seemed to lay bare every inch of her soul. Â

She was being judged. Â And if the wolf-spirit was displeased with what it found, Misao knew she would die on the spot.

Somehow, she managed to force her limbs into motion. "Misao slowly began to back away. " When she reached the cave entrance, she turned to flee, but ended up crashing headlong into something quite immovable. " With a panicked screech, she whipped out her tanto and slashed blindly at the unexpected obstacle in her way. "

A large, warm hand effortlessly caught her wrist, then hauled her into the air. " The tanto slipped from her numb fingers.

"Yare yare, is that any way to greet someone? " If you're not pleased to see me, just say so."

Her jaw nearly hit the ground as she stared at her captor.

"H-H-Hiko Seijuro!!!"

He gave her a typically arrogant smile and said, "None other. " And what are you doing here?" "

Misao was too stunned to answer.

Hiko frowned slightly and released his grip on her wrist. " Misao's legs refused to support her. " Her knees buckled and she sagged to the ground in a graceless heap.

Peering down at her, Hiko said, "Hello? " What's wrong with you, girl?"

With a slightly glazed look in her eyes, Misao mutely pointed behind her toward the back wall of the cave and the unmoving stone carving of the wolf.

"Oh ho. " I see..., " he murmured in a rather cryptic manner.

"It came to life... and it looked right at me... and I thought it was going to eat me..., " she incoherently babbled.

They both distinctly heard a scornful, "Hmph."

Misao jerked her head up. " What was THAT!?"

Hiko shrugged and picked up her tanto. " Before handing it back to Misao, he gave it a thoughtful examination. " He had recognized the weapon instantly and asked himself, (Why would old Asuko give the girl this tanto, hm?)

Aloud, he said, "What are you doing out here alone in this stretch of the woods?"

Misao finally snapped out of her daze. " She scrambled unsteadily to her feet and whispered, "What am I...? " I've got to find Aoshi and stop whatever Junichi's doing to him!"

In a bored voice, Hiko said, "Shinomori? " He's not in the area."

She whirled around and yelled, "How would YOU know!?"

Hiko merely raised an eyebrow and drawled, "Trust me. " He's not

anywhere in the general vicinity. "However...."

"Yes?" Misao snapped impatiently.

He gave her a severe look. "You youngsters have no patience. As I was about to say, I came across a bunch of dead monsters not too long ago. They had been killed by someone using a two-handed kodachi technique. From what you've told me, I presume that it's Shinomori's handiwork, but I haven't seen him."

Misao heaved a sigh of relief, then frowned in confusion. "But you said that he's not around here anymore?"

"That's right."

"Then... where is he?"

"Who knows?" Hiko gave her another one of his callous shrugs.

Misao glared at him, then stalked out of the cave. As they headed down the tablet-lined walkway, Hiko said, "And you still haven't told me what you're doing at this shrine. This place isn't exactly a spot for casual visitors."

She snapped, "Aoshi and I were coming here to find the name of...."  
Her voice abruptly trailed off.

"Of what?"

"Of a demon," Misao finished quietly as she slowed to a halt.

She thought to herself, (I can't just go blindly chasing after Aoshi! I need to locate the information that Asuko's looking for... not just for HIS sake, but for Himura and Kaoru... for everyone! People are depending on me... I can't let all of them down, damn it!)

Hiko watched Misao as she stood in the middle of the walkway, her head hanging low. Finally, she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and shook her newly shortened hair from her face. With a grim, determined expression on her face, she pulled up a handful of long grass and started to scrub the dirt and moss from one of the large stone tablets. She glanced over the text carved into the tablet, then started on the next stone.

"Well, don't just stand there! Help me!" she snapped at Hiko.

"You expect ME to...."

She leaned her head against the tablet she was working on, then spun around and said, "Please, damn it! I can't do this alone. I need your help. Himura needs your help! Everybody in Kyoto needs your help!"

He grumbled, "Don't tell me that my idiot pupil's in trouble again."

"You have NO idea how bad it is."

Hiko paused just long enough to put Misao on edge, then flicked his cape back and reached for a tuft of grass.

"I suppose if I don't help you, I'll never get any peace and quiet with all those bothersome monsters roving around in the woods."

-----

As they both cleaned off the inscribed stone tablets lining the walkway, Misao told Hiko all about Minobe Junichi, the cursed sword Kinslayer, and how the vengeful spirit was seeking revenge against Himura Kenshin. ^ She was about halfway through the story when she suddenly stopped in mid-scrub. ^ She turned and stared suspiciously at Hiko who was thoughtfully reading a freshly cleaned tablet.

With her hands on her hips, she snapped, "Just wait a second here! ^ You didn't bat an eyelash when I told you about looking for a demon's name here. ^ And you didn't even act the least bit surprised at running across a bunch of dead monsters in the forest!" ^

Misao stamped her foot and glared at Hiko. ^ "What's going on here!? ^ You and Saitoh both act like encounters with demons, cursed swords, monsters, ghosts, and all this weird crap are perfectly normal! ^ Do you guys know something that I don't!?"

"You're asking me?" Hiko responded in the most unhelpful way imaginable.

"You... you...."

He turned his back on her and said, "Are you going to stand there and scowl at me or are you going to continue with your story?"

Misao uttered a growl of frustration, then resumed her work on the tablet as she finished telling Hiko all about the events involving Kenshin, herself, and the others.

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> ----- <p>

When Aoshi demolished the door to the upstairs sitting room of the Aoiya, Okon jumped to her feet and exclaimed, "Aoshi-sama!?"

He didn't answer. ^

Frozen in shock, Okon could only stare blankly as Aoshi lifted his kodachi, then lunged toward her and Tokio. ^ Someone suddenly grabbed the back of Okon's kimono and yanked her out of the way with surprising strength, tossing her into a nearby wall. ^ Just before Okon blacked out, she saw Tokio diving out of the way of Aoshi's lethal double slash.

-----

Omasu bustled cheerfully into Misao's room, carrying a tea tray, and said, "Misao...." ^ She glanced around in confusion. ^ The room was empty.

"Misao-chan?" she called again.    Omasu peered around, but the girl was nowhere to be found.

"Hmmm.    That's very strange.    Why on earth would he say...?"

At that moment, there was a tremendous crash from the other end of the Aoiya.    Omasu dashed across Misao's room and flung open the window which overlooked the inner courtyard of the Aoiya and a small garden.    Across the courtyard, Omasu was shocked to see a woman throw herself out an upstairs window.    The woman rolled down the short roof covering the courtyard porch, then landed on her hands and knees in the garden.    She immediately jumped to her feet and started to back away from the room she had so hastily vacated.

For a bewildered second, Omasu thought that it was Okon who plunged out of the window.

(NO!    That's Tokio!)

Before the befuddled Omasu could say or do anything, there was a flash of steel and the wall of the upstairs sitting room literally disintegrated.    The lean figure of Shinomori Aoshi stood briefly in the newly created opening with bared steel in his hands, his trenchcoat fluttering, before he jumped.

Aoshi landed in the courtyard with predatory grace and immediately tried to sever Tokio's head from her shoulders.    However, Saitoh's wife proved to be unexpectedly elusive as she managed to dodge first one kodachi, then the other.

"AOSHI-SAMA!?!?" screeched Omasu.    "WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?!?"

Totally focused on killing Tokio, Aoshi didn't seem to notice Omasu's frantic cries.    The female Oniwabanshuu dashed downstairs and emerged in the courtyard just as he managed to back Tokio into a corner, leaving her with apparently nowhere to go.    The only thing that stood between Saitoh's wife and certain death was one of Okina's floor cushions, clutched in Tokio's hands.    It seemed like a pathetically inadequate shield to the horrified Omasu.    

Aoshi used the kodachi in his right hand to slice the pillow to shreds, filling the air with a blinding cloud of stuffing and fabric.    Omasu braced herself for the sickening sound of sword slicing flesh.    But as the stuffing settled out of the air, both Omasu and Aoshi realized that Tokio was nowhere to be seen.    Their only clue was the front door of the Aoiya, which now stood wide open.    A stunned Omasu then realized what she had just seen -- a traditional, but brilliantly executed ninja vanishing trick.

(I don't believe it!    But there's no other explanation!)    

Omasu found it incredible but it seemed that Saitoh's demure, mild-mannered lady of a wife is a kunoichi -- a female ninja -- just like herself or Okon.    Moreover, Tokio's ability to elude Aoshi's attacks even momentarily meant that she was an extremely skillful ninja at that.    But even the best trained kunoichi couldn't hope to defeat the finest fighter of the Oniwabanshuu in hand-to-hand combat. In running for her life, Tokio had done the only sensible thing.



^ ^ ^

When Aoshi whirled around to pursue his quarry, Omasu gasped as she caught a glimpse at his face.

(His eyes! ^ It's the same horrible, blank stare he gave us when he was hunting down Himura-san, only a hundred times worse! ^ What's wrong with him!? ^ What madness could have possessed him to....)

Then it all fell into place with a sickening thud as she watched Aoshi charge after Tokio. ^ She ran after him, out into the deserted street, only to see him vanish down an alleyway.

In a choked voice, Omasu whispered, "Possessed... he's probably possessed just like poor Kaoru! ^ Now what do I do? ^ There's no one else here except for Okon...!" ^ She abruptly stiffened. ^ Okon had been upstairs with Tokio. ^ The fact that Okon had not showed up to help her told Omasu that her friend was probably out of action... or dead.

"Oh no!"

As Omasu dashed back into the Aoiya and ran up the stairs, one frightening question kept nagging at her mind.

Where on earth is Misao?

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As Aoshi dashed down the nearly empty city streets in pursuit of his unexpectedly elusive quarry, he failed to notice a large raven silently soaring overhead, its amber eyes observing his every movement.

-----  
Painfully aware of the passing time, Misao worked quickly but as carefully as she could. ^ The script carved into the stone tablets was archaic and barely legible to her eyes, although Hiko didn't seem to have any problem with the characters. ^ Most of the tablets seemed to involve legends of the wolf-spirit of the shrine, also known as the Hunter. ^ They were fierce and bloody tales about the relentless, merciless pursuit and destruction of evil in all its many forms. ^ Some of the stories talked about demons -- Misao noted down the names -- but none of the descriptions she'd uncovered so far really matched the demon involved with the Minobe family and Kinslayer.

In her search, she came across an older, perhaps more fitting name for the wolf-spirit. ^ Inscribed on the stones nearest the cave were the words 'Aku Tsui Satsu Roh Jin', which apparently meant something like 'Prince of the God Wolf of Hunting and Killing the Evil'.

(Well, that's certainly a more romantic name than 'The Hunter', but what a mouthful!)

In her haste, Misao nearly missed what she was looking for. ^ But the mention of 'love' grabbed her attention. ^ As she ran her fingers over the characters, she slowly worked out the name.

"'Aijoh... wo... hametsu... shi... tsukusu... gaki....' Â Â The hungry devil that consumes... love? Â The Love-eater?"

Staring at the stone tablet, Misao somehow knew that she had found the one name she had been looking for. Â Squinting at the stone, she muttered, "But how does the story end? Â What happened? Â If the Hunter destroyed this demon like it did all the others, how could it possible be the one...."

Hiko said quietly, "But it wasn't destroyed."

She turned to look at him. Â "What?"

He squatted down beside her and pointed out the last few lines on the tablet.

"In their last great battle, many centuries ago, neither the demon or the Hunter could score a decisive victory," said Hiko as he scanned the text on the stone.

"Then what happened?"

"The story goes on to say that the demon, weakened from its long fight with the wolf-spirit, was sealed away by a great warrior called Minobe Fuumi." Â He glanced at Misao. Â "Didn't you say that Junichi was a Minobe?"

She nodded, then her eyes widened. Â "When that stupid woman tried to summon a demon 400 years ago to win the love of Minobe Koji, I bet she partially broken the seal or something. Â The demon certainly didn't waste the opportunity to take revenge on the Minobe family! Â By creating Kinslayer, it nearly managed to wipe out the entire family. Â I remember reading somewhere that the Minobe clan was once a great and influential family. Â Their fortunes took a real turn for the worse after Kinslayer showed up. Â Now the family's penniless and nearly extinct. Â The only living member is some old crazy woman called Emi."

Misao gave Hiko a frightened look. Â "But if the Hunter -- a powerful spirit who managed to destroy all these other evil monsters -- couldn't defeat this demon...." Â She gulped nervously.

Hiko got to his feet. Â "Yes. Â Well, that fool Kenshin certainly knows how to pick his enemies," he grumbled. Â "Naturally, he couldn't get tangled up with your normal run of demon. Â Instead he has to...."

"Excuse me!? Â A 'normal run of demon'? Â How can ANYTHING about demons be considered normal!?" Misao shouted.

"There's a lot more going on in this world than you know about. Â Get used to it, Weasel Girl," a familiar mocking voice suddenly said behind them.

Misao yelped in fright as she spun around. Â Even Hiko looked startled as he turned, his hand on his sword.

Saitoh Hajime was casually leaning against one of the stone tablets, a cigarette in hand and his mouth curled in an unmistakable smirk.

"Saitoh!" she exclaimed.    Looking into his narrow amber eyes and the lean, fierce bones of his face, Misao finally made the mental connection to another amber-eyed entity she had seen just recently.    In a strangled voice, she pointed at him with a shaky finger and stuttered, "The eyes... the same... the wolf ghost... you... it's you!"

She stumbled back, tripped on nothing in particular, and sat down hard with a stupefied expression on her face.

-----

Saitoh raised an eyebrow, then nudged the stunned girl with his boot as he muttered, "What the hell are you babbling about now?"

Although he didn't let it show, Saitoh Hajime had actually woken up just a few minutes ago.    He wasn't precisely sure just how he managed to get from his last clearly remembered location -- the clearing where he had been ambushed by those ugly dog monsters -- to this place.    The painful lump on the back of his head and a vague recollection of getting slammed into a tree might have something to do with the blank spot in his memory.   

However, he had instantly recognized his surroundings and the Wolf Shrine that he and Tokio had visited eight years ago.    After that, it was simply a matter of following the sound of the Weasel Girl's voice.

Since he wasn't getting any response from Misao, Saitoh glanced at Hiko and repeated his question.

-----

Hiko Seijuro had a tremendous amount of self-confidence, but he also had a well-developed sense of self-preservation.    His cousin Tokio was usually the most placid and easygoing of his female relatives, but if someone crossed her in matters involving her chosen mate....   

'Hell on earth' would be a massive understatement.

So when Saitoh asked him about Misao's rather incoherent statements, Hiko Seijuro, the thirteenth master of Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu, shrugged and calmly lied.

"I haven't got a clue."

-----

Saitoh glanced at the white-caped man and said, "Hiko Seijuro, the man who schooled the Battousai in Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu."

"Saitoh Hajime."    In response to the inquiring quirk of Saitoh's eyebrow, Hiko added, "I recognize you from various descriptions."

"Hmph. Â Unflattering ones, I'm sure."

"You have quite a reputation, Miburo."

The mention of his infamous nickname reminded Saitoh about Misao, who was slowly coming out of her daze. Â He glowered down at her and impatiently asked, "Are you going to start making sense or did you lose your wits along with your hair braid?"

"Ughhh...."

"What are you doing out here? Â And where the hell's Shinomori run off to?"

Her eyes abruptly focused and she jerked her head around to stare at the policeman.

Saitoh observed this instant recovery and commented slyly, "I was sure that would grab your attention, Weasel Girl."

Hiko murmured, "Weasel girl? Â Hmmm, that name suits her rather well...."

Clutching at her aching head, Misao mumbled something about Asuko and the demon, followed by some more mumblings about her confrontation with Junichi, the possessed Kaoru, and Kinslayer.

When she was finished, Saitoh scowled and said, "So the old hag sent you off to dig up some information on the demon, eh? Â Well, did you find anything?"

Misao silently pointed to the stone tablet she and Hiko had been reading. Â Saitoh's frown deepened as he began to read the legend of the Hunter and the great demon known as the Love-eater.

-----

As she nervously observed Saitoh, Misao became steadily more convinced that there was something... different... about the man. Â He had always had a sinister aura about him, but now the feeling of danger was even more noticeable. Â And she could have sworn that there was an almost feral gleam in his amber eyes that hadn't been there before. Â

At that moment, Misao couldn't quite make up her mind whether Saitoh actually WAS the ghostly wolf she had seen earlier... although figuring out how a human being could transform into a spirit creature was totally beyond her understanding.

(Or maybe Kaoru's not the only one who's possessed by something supernatural,) she thought uneasily.

She couldn't decide which possibility frightened her more. Â Misao glanced quickly at Hiko.

(Don't tell me that HE can't sense that there's something really weird going on here!)

Hiko was treating Saitoh with a sort of wary respect, which seemed

almost inconceivable for a man of his tremendous ego. "But one look at Hiko's cool, impassive expression told her that if Kenshin's master did know something about Saitoh, he certainly wasn't going to say anything to her."

-----

He hadn't been feeling quite like himself to begin with, but by the time he finished reading the story inscribed on the tablet, Saitoh knew that something was definitely wrong. "An odd sense of eagerness and anticipation seemed to dance along his nerves. It was almost as if he was somehow more... alive. The sensation could not be conveniently explained by a simple concussion or the painful lump on the back of his head."

He glanced up at the cave entrance and thought, (There's just something about this place that makes me feel....) "The same thing happened last time I was here with Tokio. Damn it, I need to get away from here....")

Showing no outward sign of his uneasiness, the policeman coolly asked Misao, "Well, now that you've found what you were looking for, are you ready to leave?"

She stared at Saitoh for a long moment, then asked, "Did you see any traces of Aoshi on your way here?"

"No. And I don't have time to go trampling all over the forest looking for him."

Misao clenched her fists and whispered, "Neither... neither do I. This information can't wait. I have to get back to Kyoto right away."

A part of her wailed at the thought of abandoning Aoshi any more than she had already done, but another part of her knew all too well that he would want her to complete her task, regardless of the cost to himself.

She glanced around. "But I'm not sure which direction I should be...."

Saitoh took an impatient drag on his cigarette. "Then don't sit there like a limp rag. I'm not going to wait for you." With those words, he stalked off down the walkway.

Misao scrambled to her feet and asked Hiko. "Are you coming to Kyoto with us?"

"No."

"But... but I told you what's happening to Himura... to the whole city! We need you!"

Hiko gave her an arrogant stare.

"You need me to do what? It's perfectly clear from your own words that all these events are centered around Kenshin and Saitoh. Nothing short of a final confrontation between those two and Junichi will resolve the present situation in Kyoto. It would be

totally pointless for me to trudge all that way to merely sit on the sidelines. "I have much better things to do with my time."

"Oh... oh, you arrogant bastard!"

With that parting shot, Misao ran off after Saitoh.

-----

As Saitoh and Misao quickly headed back toward Kyoto, he noticed Misao constantly staring at him with a puzzled and anxious look on her face. "Finally, he snapped irritably, "What's wrong with you?"

She twitched nervously. "Nothing! It's just that...."

"And if you start babbling about ghostly wolves and all that crap again, I'll hurt you," Saitoh added in a dangerous voice.

Misao clamped her mouth shut. "Normally, Saitoh's threat would have done little to keep her quiet, but the unnerving possibility that Saitoh was not exactly... himself made provoking him a very stupid thing to do.

Oddly enough, she wasn't really afraid for her own life. "Whatever that wolf-spirit was, it didn't seem interested in hurting her and it actually helped her a bit. "And while Saitoh didn't make the most comfortable of travelling companions, she definitely felt safer than she would have walking through these forests alone.

-----

Sano glared at the Takagi house servant and snapped, "What do you mean you don't know where she is?"

The middle-aged woman blinked and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but she left on an errand."

"What the devil is she doing, wandering around the city alone at a time like this?"

"I can't rightly say, sir," was the servant's stolid reply.

"Well, did she say where she was going?" Yahiko impatiently demanded.

"I believe she said something about going to the Aoiya Restaurant to drop off some papers...."

The servant found herself talking to empty air as Sano and Yahiko rushed off down the street. "They soon arrived at the Aoiya to find the front door gaping open and no one in sight.

"Where the hell is everyone?" the fighter muttered.

"Sano! Come here!"

He rushed over to Yahiko. "They both stared at the interior

courtyard. ^ There were bits of fabric scattered all over the floor, a huge hole in one of the upper story walls that faced the courtyard, and slash marks all over the porch.

There was the sound of footsteps running downstairs, then Omasu dashed around the corner and nearly ran into them. ^ She uttered a squeak of surprise, before sagging against the wall in relief.

"Sano! ^ It's only you...."

"What happened here!?"

"Well, Aoshi-sama showed up and he tried to kill Tokio-san but it wasn't his fault because he must have been possessed and she managed to escape then he ran off after her and poor Okon's out cold but I have no idea where poor Misao-chan is and I haven't been able to contact Okina yet and you couldn't imagine the look I saw on his face when he...."

His brain whirling with the onslaught of information, Sano waved his hands in the air and yelled, "HOLD IT!!! ^ Slow down!"

-----

Tokio slipped around the corner of a building and flattened herself against the wall. ^ Surprisingly, for a woman who was supposed to be running from a sword-wielding master ninja who was hell-bent on bloody murder, she looked hardly out of breath.

"Mother."

Tokio gasped and spun around to find Risako's black-clad figure standing right next to her. ^ Pressing her hand against her chest, Tokio murmured, "One of these days, you're going to give me a heart attack."

Risako shrugged, then politely asked, "I was just wondering why you were bothering to run away from Shinomori. ^ A quick spell and he'd be a tidy pile of ashes."

As she settled her kimono back into order, Tokio replied, "That would be the easy way, but I don't want to risk the demon becoming aware of any hint of Nightwitch involvement. ^ If it senses any trace of magic, it'll be even harder to lure out the monster out of hiding. ^ So I'm afraid I'm simply going to have to deal with Aoshi by purely physical means."

"Forgive me for saying so, Mother, but hand-to-hand combat is NOT your strong point."

Tokio sighed quietly. ^ "Yes, dear, I know that I'm hardly up to your level. ^ On the other hand, Aoshi's a mortal so that should make us pretty much even."

Risako smoothed the sleeve of her kimono and said, "You could allow me to dispose of Shinomori."

Tokio smiled, but said, "Thank you, dear, but I would prefer that you

remain hidden for now. "Besides, I rather like the young man. I don't want him dead unless absolutely necessary."

"Very well, Mother. But I hope you won't mind if I keep an eye on things."

"Not at all. It would be rather comforting...."

Risako suddenly stiffened. "Shinomori's coming." She glanced at Tokio and murmured very softly, "He's very good for a human. Do be careful. I'll try to honor your decision to handle him yourself, but please remember that Father would never forgive me if I let anything permanent happen to you."

With those words, Risako melted back into the shadows of the alley. A second later, a raven flew out of the same shadows and perched on a nearby gutter.

Tokio smiled at the amber-eyed bird, then turned and ran, just as Aoshi appeared at the entrance of the alleyway.

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> (end of part 21) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Many thanks to serizawa@mailexcite.com for the Japanese translations.

Next part: "Hot pursuit! Hot pursuit! " =^\_ ^=

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## 8. Parts 22-23

Rurouni Kenshin - "That Which Lingers" (Parts 22-23) by Madamhydra

This story is set in my own ALTERNATE REALITY Rurouni Kenshin universe which I've called "The Nightwitch Tales" -- think of it as Rurouni Kenshin mixed with various supernatural and paranormal elements. It takes place after the end of the Kyoto story arc. After that, all bets are off. Other stories in this alternate reality are: "Night Visitor"; "All in the Family"; and "Romancing the Wolf".

WARNING: This story is "semi-dark" -- it has dark elements (violence, profanity, etc.) but it's not a darkfic! Actually, there's quite a bit of romance in it.... " " " " ^\_-



As always, C&C is greatly appreciated! ^ ^ ^\_ ^

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>

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> Part 22: ^ THE SHEDDING OF MASKS<br>

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> Text Conventions<br> ( ^ ) are character thoughts  
> / and // // represent various sorts of mental dialogue  
> \* ----- \* ----- \* ^ marks the start/end of dreams or flashbacks  
> [ ] denote visual or time notes  
<p>

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[ Kyoto, mid-August, 1878 (11th year of the Meiji period) ]

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As the Battousai raced through the streets of Kyoto after his quarry, it was almost as if he was travelling back through years gone by. ^ He passed things and places that no longer existed... he saw faces of people dead for many years....

....and he spilled the blood of opponents that he had killed over a decade ago with frightening ease....

Not frightening to him -- he knew his skill -- but rather for the few people still brave enough, desperate enough, or perhaps stupid enough to continue roving the streets of Kyoto.

The Battousai paused near an intersection. ^ Minobe Junichi was toying with him... playing some perverse game of hide-and-seek. ^ In truth, the flash of blind rage that had sent him charging after Minobe had faded in the first few moments of the chase. ^ However, the Battousai knew that the undead spirit possessing Kaoru was leading him on with a definite goal in mind. ^ He didn't know Junichi's exact purpose, but sometimes the only way to deal with a trap was to simply take the bait.

He heard a young woman's taunting laughter behind him and the Battousai's expression became just a little colder. ^ He turned to

catch a fleeting glimpse of Kaoru's long black hair disappearing around a corner.

Minobe Junichi ran and the fearsome Hitokiri Battousai followed, deeper into the city of Kyoto and ever deeper into his own bloody past.

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It took a good ten minutes for Sano and Yahiko to sort out Omasu's disjointed story. And since Sano and Yahiko kept talking at the same time, it took nearly as long before Omasu could comprehend what had occurred during the Kenshin's most recent confrontation between the possessed Kaoru and Minobe Junichi.

Sano finally muttered, "So you're saying that Aoshi showed up without Misao?"

It took all of Omasu's self-control to keep from bursting into tears as she nodded violently and blurted out, "Yes! I DID notice that he was sounding a little strange, but I had NO idea...!"

"Yeah, yeah. Hey, it's not your fault! You had no reason to think that anything like this would happen."

Despite her usual, excitable nature, Omasu was an experienced ninja. She didn't panic easily. However, the traumatic events of that afternoon were almost too much for her. She wrung her hands and said, "Didn't Kaoru say... I mean, didn't Minobe say something about Aoshi-sama killing... killing the woman he loves? Do you think he was talking about... Misao?"

"Unless Aoshi's been keeping a mistress stashed away somewhere, who else could the bastard be talking about?" Sano snapped tensely.

Omasu was too overwrought to take offense at this comment. She whispered almost to herself, "I... I almost wish that was true. Otherwise, that means that Misao-chan...." Wringing her hands, she gave Sano and Yahiko an anguished look. "You didn't... you didn't see the look in his eyes! Yahiko, do you remember when he came by the Aoiya hunting for Himura-san?"

"Yeah...." the boy muttered. And

"Do you remember his eyes... how they looked back then?"

Yahiko nodded slowly.

Omasu gulped, then continued. "When I saw his face this afternoon... it was the same cold emptiness, only a thousand times worse! Like a damned soul...."

She clamped her hand over her mouth and looked away, unable to continue. Sano abruptly reached out and hugged her close. Omasu gratefully rested her head against his shoulder and whispered, "The terrible thing is... it may be too late to save him...."

Yahiko stiffened and said, "What do you mean!? You really think he'd...."

"I know you think Aoshi-sama's cold and unfeeling, but he cares for Misao and very deeply, too. ^ But if he truly LOVES Misao... if she's really dead... and if he was the one to kill her...." ^ Omasu shook her head sadly. ^ "I'm afraid... even if we could free him from the demon's power... I'm afraid that there won't be any way to make him... live...."

Sano could only give her shoulder a gentle squeeze. ^ Omasu could very well be right. ^ If Aoshi could go off the deep end over the deaths of Hannya and the other Oniwabanshuu, the fighter hated to think how Aoshi would react if he was in fact responsible for killing Misao with his own hands.

-----

When Saitoh and Misao arrived at the outskirts of Kyoto, he drawled, "Now can you find your way home?"

She gave him a nervous look, but did her best to reply with her usual cocky tone.

"Of course I can! ^ Just because I got turned around in the forest...."

"Whatever," Saitoh said, apparently bored with the whole matter. ^ With a dismissive flick of his hand, he started to walk away.

"Where are you going?" Misao demanded.

He paused an instant, then turned back toward her and gave Misao a mocking look. ^

"To do my duty, of course." ^ His lips then curled upward in a bone-chilling smile. ^

Misao unconsciously backed up a step. ^ It wasn't that Saitoh had said anything unusual -- unusual for him, at least -- but there was something truly scary about the look in his eyes. ^ She knew that he was cruel, dangerous, and all that, but now there was an unnerving intensity and power in the man which hadn't been there before.

"Uh... right. ^ Then I'll be on my way," she muttered.

"To the Aoiya, I presume."

"Yeah...." ^ She nervously shuffled her feet, edging away from him.

Saitoh chuckled softly, then said, "Until later, weasel girl."

Misao was too rattled to notice the insult. ^ Her nerve broke and she bolted. ^ But even as she ran as fast as she could toward the Aoiya, she could still feel Saitoh's eyes upon her.

-----

The red-haired swordsman who prowled the streets of Kyoto was a curious blending of the past and the present. He had all the memories of Himura Kenshin -- memories of a ronin's wanderings after the Bakamatsu no Douran... memories of Sano, Yahiko, and all the other friends he had come to know... memories of Kaoru. However, the way he interpreted those memories and his mode of thinking were almost entirely that of the Hitokiri Battousai -- cold, precise, and ruthless in a way that was beyond most people's comprehension.

Just as it had been during the Douran, the part of him that was Kenshin was the strategist, setting the goals to be achieved, but it was the Battousai who was the tactician, the one who did whatever was necessary to achieve those goals.

So it had been a decade ago... and so it was now again.

And with the Battousai's preeminence, the overwhelming emotions that had been clouding Kenshin's thinking had been stripped away -- or at least momentarily pushed aside.

No matter how desperate Kenshin wanted to save Kaoru, he also knew that Minobe Junichi had to be stopped before he could destroy Kyoto and perhaps the entire country... no matter what the cost. Junichi might delude himself into thinking all the unnatural events in Kyoto and Tokyo had occurred for his sole benefit, but Kenshin knew better. He could sense it. Junichi was being used by a greater, darker power and the fool didn't even know it.

Shishio Mokoto had wanted to dominate the country by blood and fire in order to make it stronger. Kenshin, Saitoh, and Sano had risked their lives to stop the would-be tyrant because his plans would have caused great suffering for the ordinary people and an untold number of deaths. But this time was different. The danger was infinitely greater. It was literally a fate worse than death.

Junichi's unseen master -- most likely Kinslayer -- was bent on destroying the fabric of the world itself and reweaving it to suit its own twisted desires.

The cost of failure was too high. There could be no holding back. To save the woman he loved, the city of Kyoto, and possibly the entire country, it might be necessary for Kamiya Kaoru to die.

Kenshin could only hope that Kaoru would understand and forgive him for the decision and if necessary, the act.

In a way, Junichi had done him an unintentional favor... he had taught Himura Kenshin to kill again.

He had killed for an ideal....  
> He had killed for survival.... He had killed out of anger....

After the Bakamatsu no Douran, he had truly believed that the deliberate taking of life could never be justified.

He had been wrong.

Now he was preparing to kill again... out of love.

And somewhere in the depths of Kenshin's soul, something stirred and began to awaken. ^

Mighty coils slowly rasped across each other... scales rustled... a great golden eye opened....

....then Kenshin heard a voice that echoed as if from the bottom of a deep well.

/ To yourself be true.... /

-----

Outside the Aoiya restaurant, Yahiko clutched his shinai and snapped, "So what do we do now?"

Letting go of Omasu as she regained her composure, Sano said, "Do you have any idea where Aoshi and Tokio might be?" ^ He could hardly believe what Omasu had said about Saitoh's wife. ^ He had no problems of thinking about Okon, Omasu, and even Misao being ninja, but elegant, placid Tokio? ^ It boggled the mind. ^

Omasu shook her head and said, "I sent messages out to Okina telling him what happened, but I haven't gotten a response back. ^ The other Oniwabanshuu have been notified to keep a look out for Aoshi-sama. ^ With all the disturbances in the city...." ^ She shrugged helplessly.

"How's Okon?"

"She got knocked into a wall pretty hard. ^ She's still unconscious, but I think she'll be all right. ^ However, I don't want to leave her alone...."

Sano nodded. ^ "Yeah." ^ He slammed his fist into his palm in frustration. ^ "Damn it! ^ With Tokio running off and Aoshi chasing her, the two of them could be anywhere in the city!"

"Sounds just like Kenshin and Kaoru, doesn't it?" Yahiko muttered. ^ "We haven't got a clue where any of them are!" ^ Kicking at a loose cobblestone, he added, "So all we can do is sit on our butts until we get some more information!"

Sano growled, "And who knows where the hell Saitoh might be?"

"And can you imagine what his reaction will be when he finds out that Aoshi tried to hack off his wife's head!?" ^ The young boy threw up his hands. ^ "I don't believe this! Kaoru AND Aoshi are possessed, Kenshin's gone totally Battousai on us, Tokio's running for her life, and who the hell knows what's happened to the Weasel Girl...."

"Don't... call me... that..., butthead....," panted a familiar voice behind them.

They all whirled around and stared at Misao who was leaning heavily against a nearby wall. ^ Covered from head to toe with bruises and

scratches, her clothes bloodied and torn, there was no denying that she was a mess. ^ It was also clear that she was so exhausted that she could barely stand. ^

Sano and Yahiko simply stood there, their mouths gaping, as Omasu said the first thing that came to mind.

"What happened to your hair!?" the female Oniwabanshuu blurted as she stared at Misao's hair which now ended raggedly around the nape of the girl's neck.

After grabbing a few deep breaths, Misao barely managed to wheeze out, "What's... going...?"

"MISAO-CHAN!!!" ^ Omasu lunged forward and hugged the girl tightly. ^ She squeezed Misao so hard that the girl nearly fainted from lack of air.

Sano finally got his jaw back into place and yelled, "You're alive!"

"Hey, let go of her or she'll pass out!" Yahiko protested.

After a few moments to catch her breath, Misao said, "What do you mean 'alive'? ^ What's going on here? ^ And where's Jiya? ^ I have to tell him... something terrible's happened to Aoshi...."

The dead silence that followed made the girl jerk up her head.

Sano gruffly said, "Aoshi's already been here."

"WHAT!?!?"

The fighter looked away and added quietly, "He tried to kill Tokio."

"He tried to kill... WHY!?" ^ Her gaze skittered around the area as if she expected to find Tokio's body lying in the street.

Before anyone could answer, she held up her hand and whispered, "No. ^ I know why.... ^ Junichi, you... you BASTARD!" ^ Misao went pale with rage, then suddenly froze. ^ She turned to Sano and said in a tightly controlled voice, "Aoshi TRIED to kill Tokio? ^ You mean... you mean he didn't succeed? ^ But how...? ^ Did Himura stop him?"

"Uh... no." ^ Sano scratched the back of his head before continuing. ^ "Tokio managed to get away. ^ Aoshi followed her."

Misao blinked in astonishment. ^ "You mean Saitoh's wife managed to escape Aoshi all by herself?" ^ She allowed a faint trace of hope to enter her voice. ^ "Then he couldn't have been really trying...."

Omasu shook her head sharply. ^ "Misao-chan, he was deadly serious. ^ If Tokio-san hadn't known exactly what to do, she would have been killed instantly." ^

"You're not trying to tell me that Tokio...!?"

The female Oniwabanshuu nodded. "She's a kunoichi and exceptionally skilled."

Misao blinked, then finally said, "So... so where is she now?"

"I don't know," muttered Sano.

"So where's Aoshi!?"

"I don't know that either!"

Misao grabbed Sano's jacket and somehow managed to shake the much taller man hard enough to rattle his teeth.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW!?"

Sano managed to yank himself free and shouted back, "Exactly that! I don't know! Omasu said they took off running and they haven't been seen since! And by the way, what the hell happened to you!?"

Misao glared furiously at him. The fear and worry knotting in her guts became too much for her and she took out her frustration on the closest available target.

She yelled, "What happened to me? I'll tell you just what happened to ME! Tokio's grand-aunt Asuko sent Aoshi and me to some old shrine to find information about the Minobe demon. What happened then, you ask? We end up getting separated, Kaoru shows up, and Junichi tries to talk me becoming a mindless slave. And while you were merrily strolling around Kyoto, I get chased all over the forest by pig-dog demons, end up nose-to-nose with this monstrous wolf spirit call the Hunter, nearly get a heart-attack when Hiko Seijuro suddenly decides to pop up, AND I won't even BEGIN to tell you the weirdness going on with that psycho cop Saitoh!!!" By this time, she was shouting at the top of her lungs.

After taking a few deep breaths, she folded her arms and added in a grim voice, "And to top it all off, I find out that the particular demon we're facing is one of the most powerful around! So there!"

Yahiko gritted his teeth before shouting furiously, "What the hell do you mean 'merrily strolling around Kyoto'!? We haven't been having a damn walk in the park, you know! WE had to deal with that crazy old Emi Minobe bitch! And if that wasn't enough, Kenshin's sakabatou somehow turns into a REAL sword and he ends up KILLING a bunch of Shinsengumi...."

Misao waved her hands and yelled, "Whoa! Whoa! What do you mean 'killing'? Kenshin!?"

Yahiko glared up at her and snarled, "You heard me right! Kenshin KILLED those guys!" He pointed at the splatters of blood on Sano's white jacket. "Where do you think THOSE came from!? A damn nosebleed!? Then Junichi shows up in Kaoru's body and tells us that he's somehow taken over Aoshi's mind because Aoshi thinks he's killed YOU! Then Junichi says something that makes Kenshin TOTALLY flip out and off he goes after Kaoru!"

Before the situation could degenerate further, a young man ran up to Omasu and gasped, "I think we found them! Aoshi-sama... and a woman!"

"Where?" shouts Misao, grabbing his shirt.

"About ten blocks away to the south, the street with all the pottery shops!"

Without a word, Sano grabbed Misao by the waist and tucked her under his arm.

"Sano, what the hell do you think you're...?" she yelped.

"Shut up, Weasel! You're too tired to run and you're probably the only person who can get through to Aoshi! Omasu, stay here and let Okina or Kenshin know what happened if they show up!"

With those words, Sano, Misao, and Yahiko headed southward as fast as they could run.

-----

A tall, silent figure stood on a rooftop, his torn and bloodied trenchcoat fluttering weakly in the faint breeze like the wings of a dying bird. Aoshi

Aoshi's body throbbed from the injuries inflicted by the demons and earlier by Misao, but it meant nothing to him. Aoshi

The greater pain cancels the lesser pain. Aoshi

How could puny things like mere flesh wounds and broken ribs matter when one's heart and soul are shredded beyond repair? Aoshi

The scene replayed itself over and over again in his mind. Aoshi However, hopelessly mired by misery and grief, Aoshi failed to notice the subtle changes that began to creep into his memory... changes that steadily fed his own guilt and raised doubts that ate like acid into his soul.

What had once merely been a shadow-obscured round shape suspended from Kaoru's hand by a thick rope that might have been a braid now became clearly visible in his mind's eye. Aoshi There was now no question of that object being anything EXCEPT Misao's severed head.

He could now recall little details that should have told him that something was not right with the monster he fought... things that should have told him that Misao was there....

Had he heard her voice faintly begging for him to stop? Aoshi Had the monster's smell been strangely familiar? Aoshi Had he been so carried away by the monster's apparent dangerousness that he missed all these hints of Misao's presence?

And more and more often, everywhere he turned, he thought he saw Misao staring at him with wide, accusing eyes... horrified eyes that demanded to know why he had done such a monstrous thing to her.



That same look had haunted his dreams for the past year. ^ It was the same expression she had had when she found him standing over Okina's battered and bleeding body. ^ Back then, he had felt nothing... regretted nothing....

But now, when he desperately wanted to tell her he was so sorry, he knew Misao would never hear him... she never forgive him. ^ Why should she? ^ All he had ever done was cause her misery and suffering throughout her life. ^ Had he ever given her any moments of happiness? ^ Strange, but he couldn't seem to remember any. ^ He couldn't even remember her smile....

All he could think of was her pain and sorrow -- he could clearly recall Himura telling him that Misao was weeping because of him. ^ It was so easy to picture her tears. ^ ^

The only another thing he seemed able to remember was her hatred.

With perfect clarity, he could remember the words she had hurled at him as she tried to kill him in those woods outside of Tokyo... how she accused him of being a coward... of never caring about her... of depriving her all the people she had ever cared about. ^ Hannya, Beshimi, Shikijou, Hyottoko.... ^ And what about Okina, whom he had nearly slain? ^ What about the other Oniwabanshuu, whom he probably would have also killed in order to get at Himura Kenshin?

Aoshi had vague memories of Misao talking... how she said something about loving him, but was that recent or long ago? ^ He wanted to tell that he loved her, too, but now it was far too late. ^ Even if her ghost could hear him, why should she believe anything her murderer said?

And Misao's ghost was coming ever closer....

-----  
In the streets below, Aoshi's chosen victim carefully slipped from shadow to shadow. ^ Tokio had lost track of Aoshi just a few minutes ago. ^ He was certainly still in the area -- her ability to sense the demon's malignant presence told her that much -- but when dealing with someone as dangerous as Aoshi, a general idea of his location was woefully inadequate. ^ Shinomori Aoshi might be a mortal, but she in no way underestimated the hazards of dealing him in these narrow streets and alleyways. ^ Only a person of Risako's skills could presume to challenge him on this sort of terrain with any degree of impunity. ^ For anyone else, the slightest mistake could easily be fatal.

She had more precise ways of detecting Aoshi's location, but just as she could sense the demon's presence, the demon could sense the use of all but the subtlest use of magical power in the area.

No, she would have to handle this strictly with flesh and steel alone. ^ It was more than a little risky, but weighed against her desire to secure her husband's safety from his ancient adversary, there was no question of what she would do.

-----  
A large raven watched as Tokio stealthily made her way through the alleyways.   ^ From its elevated perch, it was the only one to watch Aoshi silently appear on the ridgeline of the neighboring building.  
^

He settled into a predatory crouch and waited.   ^

The bird cocked its sleek black head, as if to appreciate Aoshi's skill, then picked up a small piece of broken roof tile in its beak.   ^ It waited until it caught a near imperceptible shift in his body, then tossed the tile shard into the street below with a sharp flick of the head.

When the shard landed, it made only a faint plinking noise, but that was more than enough warning.

Tokio immediately glanced up, just in time to see Aoshi plunging down toward her.   ^ She jumped to her left.   ^ Despite the swiftness of her leap, Aoshi still managed to slash open her kimono from hip to hem.   ^ If she had been a fraction of a second slower, he would have taken off her leg as well.

He landed only a few feet away and without the slightest pause, whipped his other kodachi across toward her chest.

Another backward leap took Tokio out of immediate striking range.   ^ As Aoshi emerged from the shadows, his kodachi dully gleaming in the dim afternoon light, Tokio reached behind her back and slipped two slender items from her obi.

A graceful snap of both wrists and the slender rods unfurled into lethal crescents of steel.   ^ Like an elegant courtesan playing with a mask, Tokio held one crescent in front of her face, concealing everything except her dark eyes.   ^   ^ She languidly held her other arm out at shoulder height to her right, almost as if inviting her opponent to come closer.   ^

A night bird trilled softly, then fell silent.

Aoshi's eyes narrowed.   ^ Tokio watched him in return, missing nothing.   ^ Over the edge of the steely crescent in her left hand, something about her eyes hinted at a hidden smile and many mysteries.

-----  
He stopped and lifted his head up as if to catch an intriguing scent.   ^ It was a familiar one, not of this world.   ^ It reeked of hunger, blood, malice, and death.

He imagined that his own scent would be rather similar.   ^ Perhaps without the malice....   ^

Then again, perhaps not.

A stray dog shivered nervously and scuttled away with its tail tucked tightly between its legs as the lean policeman smiled slowly....

-----  
Sano, Misao, and Yahiko soon arrived on the potters' street market.  
Â Like much of Kyoto, the area was deserted and the heavy cloud cover  
turned the middle of the afternoon into a murky twilight.

Misao wiggled free of Sano's grip and took a good look around.

"Do you think they're still here?" muttered Yahiko.

"Who knows?"

From the expression on Misao's face, Sano knew she was struggling to  
control her desire to start shouting Aoshi's name.

Suddenly, there was a muffled crash to their left, followed by the  
unmistakable clang of steel meeting steel. Â But before they could  
take a step toward the disturbance, the disturbance came to them.

Less than ten feet away, planks went flying as a woman was flung  
through a wooden wall and out into the street practically at their  
feet. Â Sano caught a fleeting glimpse of an exquisite pair of long,  
white legs and a swirl of long black hair as the woman rolled  
gracefully to her feet. Â In each hand, there was a gleaming crescent  
of steel.

Before Sano and his companions could react, the woman lashed out with  
her foot. Â The firm, but controlled foot-sweep was enough to knock  
Yahiko aside and out of her way, just as Shinomori Aoshi lunged  
through the opening, kodachi poised for attack.

What followed was a blur of lightning fast attacks on Aoshi's part,  
using both kodachi and feet, and an equally fast flurry of parries,  
dodges, mixed with the occasional counterattack by the woman.

As he scrambled back to his feet, Yahiko muttered, "What the hell is  
she using? Â Fans!?" Â

It would have seemed ludicrous, except at that moment, the woman  
flicked one fan shut and used it to deflect Aoshi's right hand blade  
while simultaneously opening a bloody slash along his left forearm  
with the razor-sharp edge of the open fan held in her other hand.

The exchange ended as abruptly as it began with the two opponent  
standing about thirty feet apart, quietly panting.

It was only at that moment that Sano and the others recognized  
Tokio... a Tokio they had never imagined they would see. Â Her hair  
dangled loosely around her face, there was blood trickling from her  
nose, and her kimono was slashed open in numerous places. Â Her left  
cheek was already darkening with what promised to be a spectacular  
bruise. Â However, the rips and fresh blood stains on his trenchcoat,  
along with the way he moved, testified that Shinomori Aoshi hadn't  
escaped totally unscathed either.

-----

Despite Misao's teasing, Sano had never really been attracted to Tokio, not as a woman. ^ Perhaps he had been obsessing about her, but only because she was just another fragment of the puzzle that was Saitoh Hajime. ^ He knew she was beautiful, but she had always seemed so prim and ladylike, almost like a nun.

But watching her now, fighting for her life, Sano was struck almost breathless by Tokio's sexual allure. ^ The blood running down her face and the bruises did nothing to distract from this primal attraction, but rather seemed to only highlight her beauty. ^

No more modesty. ^ No more demure manners. ^

This Tokio had intensity and concentration, passion and determination. ^ Her gaze was sharp and direct, her movements certain. ^ ^ Even though she was outmatched by Aoshi, she was not about to go down without a fight.

As Kenshin had said back in Tokyo and as clearly shown by Aoshi's condition, she was definitely NOT harmless.

Sano realized that he was finally seeing what Kenshin had seen. ^ This was the steel behind the silk. ^ This is the woman that the notorious Mibu's Wolf had chosen for his own. ^

And she was magnificent.

-----  
Misao gritted her teeth as she watched the two fighters. ^ While Tokio's technique and speed were superb, she was facing Shinomori Aoshi, the Okashira and very best of the Oniwabanshuu. ^ If Aoshi hadn't been suffering from all the injuries that Misao herself had inflicted and if he hadn't already fought a battle with Junichi's monsters, Tokio probably would have died long ago.

The girl glanced at Aoshi's face and nearly fainted. ^ While his face was as impassive as ever, Aoshi's eyes were unspeakably cold and empty. ^

(Just like after he attacked and nearly killed Jiya.... only worse. ^ Much worse....)

But imperfectly masked by the sheer emptiness in his gaze, Misao thought she could see something even worse... a terrible, unbearable pain buried deep inside the man she loved.

(Aoshi, I'm sorry! ^ I didn't know that Junichi would anything like this to you....)

Her horrified paralysis abruptly shattered and Misao bolted toward Aoshi before Sano or Yahiko could stop her.

"AOSHI!!!" she screamed. ^ At the sound of her voice, Aoshi froze.

Sano just missed grabbing a hold of Misao's sash. ^ ^ "No! ^ You don't know what he'll do...!" he frantically shouted.

But as Misao ran by Tokio, Saitoh's wife swiftly slipped one of her fans into her obi, then reached out and pulled the girl to an abrupt stop.

"Let me go!" Misao protested as she tried to wiggle free of Tokio's surprisingly strong grip.

"Misao!"    Tokio shook the girl's shoulder sharply to get her attention.    In a calm, but startlingly firm voice, she said, "Listen to me, Misao.    You have to understand what's going on before you can help him."

The girl snapped her head around to stare at Tokio.

"What are you talking about?" Misao demanded.

"Listen carefully.    Aoshi's mind and soul are trapped in a dark dream.    An endless nightmare in which he relives your supposed murder over and over again, constantly haunted by accusing ghosts that undoubtedly look just like you.    Do you understand?    He sees the outside world through a distorted window of the demon's making.    In this state, he probably thinks you're just another phantasm coming to torment him.    And people lash out instinctively at the source of their pain.    He could easily kill you before he realizes that you're not some figment of his guilty conscience.    And that would truly be the end of him."

Misao turned chalky white with shock.

Without loosening her grip, Tokio continued gently.    "By keeping Aoshi trapped in this private hell, the demon prevents him from resisting its control."

"But how could it...?"

The older woman sighed and shook her head slightly.    "A newly awakened heart, like a young child, is the most vulnerable to these sorts of cruelties."

Misao opened her mouth to speak, but Tokio murmured, "Shhh.    Watch him."

The girl held her breath as Aoshi continued to stare at her.    Her heart leapt with hope when she saw some emotion awake in his eyes... then it seemed to stop beating when she realized that Tokio was right.    Aoshi wasn't glad to see her.    There was no joy in his eyes, only a combination of horrified recognition and... fear?    Misao didn't know whether she wanted to scream from sheer despair or burst into tears.

"Aoshi....    PLEASE...."    

The anguish in her voice seemed to hit Aoshi like a physical blow.    He flinched and turned his head, as if he couldn't bear to look at her.

Tears began to trickle down Misao's cheeks as she whispered, "Then... then what can we do?    I can't just leave him like that...."    Her voice caught in a soft sob.    At that sound, Aoshi shuddered again and retreated a step.    Misao couldn't stand it.    It was like

watching a horribly abused animal cringe at the slightest hint of a raised voice.

Tokio said softly, "Misao, you must control yourself and stay calm. Every cry of sorrow, every sign of your misery, only allows the demon to hurt him more."

"I can't stand to see him suffering like this...."

Tokio's voice was soft, but relentless. "Misao, his ability to feel pain is a good sign. It means that somewhere deep inside, his soul and heart is still alive. He can still be reached, but he needs your help. You have to be strong. If he hasn't given up, then how can you?"

"Then... then what do I have to do?" Misao whispered, using every bit of willpower she had to keep her voice even.

"Demons like this feed on the darker emotions -- loss, misery, despair and the like -- but they each have their own favorite 'food', so to speak."

Misao's thoughts raced. (Yes... of course. Why is the demon that created Kinslayer called the Love-Eater? The damn thing must feed off the suffering caused by the destruction of loved ones. Kenshin and Kaoru... Tokio and Saitoh... Aoshi and I....)

(If the demon's using my pain to hurt Aoshi, then what can I use to reach him...?)

The girl suddenly took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. Sensing that Misao had come to some decision, Tokio released her grip on the girl's shoulder.

"Aoshi," Misao called out as she took a few steps forward.

He shook his head sharply as if trying to deny her existence.

"Aoshi," she repeated firmly.

"You're dead. I killed you." he said in a flat, dead voice.

"No, you didn't. Look at me." She took another step forward, doing her best to ignore the bloodied kodachi still gripped in his hands.

He slowly turned to look at her as if he was unable to ignore her voice.

She shrugged as nonchalantly as she could manage. "See? A little dirty and bruised, but I'm certainly not dead." Another step closer.

Aoshi frowned as he seemed to struggle to make sense of her words.

"I.... Did I do that to you?"

Misao couldn't understand what Aoshi talking about. His words

didn't seem to make any sense. "Why would he be asking if he caused her bruises?" She shook her head and continued.

"And after our talk in the woods, do you really think that I'd let you get away from me that easily?" Misao took another casual step, but the flash of stark despair in Aoshi's eyes made her freeze.

"I know that I've caused you so much pain, but do you really hate me... that much?" he whispered dully.

Misao blinked in confusion, then she spluttered, "I wasn't talking about THAT talk! I was talking about our OTHER talk in the OTHER woods, you idiot!" She suddenly clapped her hands over her mouth.

(Oh hell, now I've totally blown it!)

But curiously, Misao's impulsive outburst seemed to have reached Aoshi much more than her other words had. He frowned slightly as if struggling to recall something.

Yahiko had been afraid to do anything that might disturb that fragile rapport between Misao and Aoshi. However, he coughed softly and said in a tentative way, "Uh... Misao? Maybe if you act more like your... um, normal self, you'll get through to him better?"

Misao stiffened and gave Yahiko a nasty sideways glare as she silently demanded further explanations.

"Uh... more yourself, you know." The boy sweated nervously as Misao continued to glare at him. Normally, tactfulness was the last thing Yahiko worried about -- if he had an opinion, he let everyone know it. However, this was anything but a normal situation. He struggled for a polite way to describe Misao's personality. Finally, he mumbled, "Uh... happy? Cheerful? Chirpy? That sort of thing?"

(What the hell does that brat think I am? A damn bird!?)

She started to scowl angrily, but Aoshi's uneasy movement caused her to hastily smooth out her expression.

(What? What can I talk about that will really get through to him? Wait. He keeps talking about how he's hurt me. It's like that's the only thing he can think about.... But that's not true! He's done so many things to make me smile. Doesn't he remember all those times he...?) Misao inhaled sharply. (Maybe he doesn't....)

She suddenly smiled. It wasn't a big smile, but there was an undeniable sparkle in her expression as she said, "Do you remember the Bon festival when I was eight years old?"

Aoshi blinked in bewilderment.

"We went to watch the bonfires around Kyoto, then you took me to the canals so I could see all the paper lanterns floating on the water. Beshimi made me a lantern of my own, of blue and white paper."

She could see Aoshi's body gradually relaxing as she spoke. More

importantly, he actually seemed to listen to what she was saying.

"And I ate myself sick on rice cakes, so you carried me home," she said with a soft chuckle. ^

He stared at her as if he was afraid that she might vanish if he looked away for an instant.

"You know, when I put my lantern in the water, I made a very special wish."

"A... wish?" ^ There was now a faint tone of curiosity creeping in Aoshi's voice.

She nodded vigorously. ^ "Uh-uh. ^ Everyone tells me that I'm too impatient, but I've waited eight years for my wish to come true." ^ Misao gave Aoshi a wistful smile. ^ "And I'm still waiting."

-----  
Watching the confrontation between Misao and Aoshi was almost unbearable for Sano. ^ He had no idea where Misao was getting the strength to keep up that calm, conversational tone when she had to be in a state of near-hysterics on the inside.

Aoshi looked like a damned soul who was gradually realizing that salvation might -- just might -- be tantalizingly within reach. ^ ^

(Go girl! ^ I think you're actually getting through to him....) ^

But without warning, Aoshi suddenly lunged at Misao and lashed out with both kodachi.

"Shit...!" yelled Yahiko.

Although the damage had already been done, both Sano and Yahiko were about to charge forward to attack Aoshi. ^ However, Tokio flung up her hand in a commanding gesture and said in a soft, firm voice that was impossible to disobey.

"NO."

Halted literally in their tracks, the two of them could only stare in horror. ^ Aoshi stood motionless within arm's length of Misao. ^ Something dark dripped from both of his blades. ^ The girl was still on her feet. ^ She was still standing. ^

But she didn't move. ^

Sano held his breath, expecting at any moment to see her collapse to the ground, blood spurting from her mortally wounded body.

Something did hit the street with a moist thud, but it wasn't Misao.



Yahiko swore and sat down abruptly as the slashed corpses of two gangly creatures slowly faded into view. ^ They lay like broken toys on the muddy street, one to Misao's left and the other to her right, with their long, sickle-like claws gleaming dully in the dim light.

"Misao...", Aoshi quietly pleaded in the thinnest of whispers.

She finally moved. ^ Misao ran forward and wrapped her arms around Aoshi as tightly as possible, broken arm and all. ^ As she snuggled as close to him as she could manage, she was both laughing and crying her heart out.

-----

Aoshi blinked and gasped. ^ He had seen Misao standing in front of him, but he had no way to be sure whether she was real or just another accusing shade. ^ But then the vision had done something that none of the other ghostly images had.

She had shouted at him. ^  
> She had smiled at him. ^ <br> And she had laughed. ^

He had been afraid to hope... afraid that this Misao was just a vision haunting a demented, guilt-wracked mind. ^ But when he sensed the monsters attacking, it hadn't mattered whether she was real or a mere figment of his imagination.

He would not allow Misao -- not this smiling, laughing Misao -- to be harmed.

But now he could feel the warmth of her body next to his... feel her body shaking with laughter.... ^ The kodachi slipped from his slack fingers as he slowly gazed down at her.

"You're... you're REAL...", he whispered.

Misao hiccuped and uttered a watery giggle.

"You're not dead...."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you, you stubborn idiot!" she complained between snuffles.

He grabbed her face between his hands and stared down at her as if to etch that moment in his memory... the brilliant joy of her bright blue eyes, the happiness in her smile.... ^

And not only of this moment, but of all the times when she had been growing up. ^ Unbelievable as it seemed, he could now remember that he had somehow managed to make her happy as a child. ^ And despite all he had done in his obsessed quest to defeat Himura Kenshin, she remained happy to see him. ^

She still wanted to be with him.

"I thought that I had killed you," he whispered slowly. ^ Even saying the words seemed to hurt. ^ Aoshi frowned, then gently ran his right hand through her drastically shortened hair. ^ "I saw the braid... and the head...."

Misao's face turned white. ^ (So that's it...!) ^

She choked out, "I had to cut my braid off so I could escape the monsters chasing me. ^ I didn't even think that Junichi would use it to hurt you so badly...." ^

Her words became muffled as Aoshi silently hugged her close.

"It doesn't matter now," he said quietly. ^ He had something to tell her. ^ He wasn't saying it just for her sake, although he hoped it was the thing she had wished for all those years ago. ^

But he was really saying it because he needed to let her know.

"Do you remember when I told you that patience often wins the war, if not the battle?" Aoshi murmured.

Her sniffles and mutterings abruptly stopped, then her eyes went wide as he leaned down and whispered something for her ears alone.

"I love you."

-----

The intensity of emotion between Misao and Aoshi got to the point where it was embarrassing to watch. ^ Yahiko and Sano looked at each other and grinned wearily.

The fighter turned to Tokio and said a bit uncertainly, "Uh... how are you feeling?"

She shrugged calmly as she dabbed delicately at the blood slowly trickling from her nose. ^

"It's nothing serious or permanent, Sano. ^ Thank you for asking."

-----

Although she looked suitably relieved when Aoshi had finally snapped out of whatever dark trance he had been in, Tokio had not relaxed her guard either.

The demon was not about to give up so easily. ^ It had clearly intended to set Kenshin against her husband, but by this point, the demon had probably figured out that its initial plan was not working. ^ Junichi had indeed roused the Battousai, but the Hitokiri Battousai was not the blood-crazed murderer that the demon had apparently assumed him to be.

Himura Kenshin was a cold, rational killer -- a trait passed down from grandfather to mother to child. ^ He killed to suit his own purpose and no one else's. ^ Kenshin certainly wouldn't dance to a demon's whims. ^

Oh, he might have fought Hajime for threatening Kaoru, Yahiko, and Sano, but that was an issue of territory. ^ It was a natural reaction. ^ After all, Hajime had invaded the Kamiya Dojo with the deliberate intention of provoking Kenshin.

But here in Kyoto, matters were different. ^ Kenshin and her husband were working toward the same goal. ^ Both of them wanted to stop the chaos and the evil that threatened to consume the city.

For the moment, the demon needed a host capable of surviving a battle with Hajime. ^ Even with the power and skill that Kinslayer was capable of providing, Kaoru would not do. ^ Hiko was even more intractable and stubborn than Kenshin. ^ That left only one other person....

-----

He could sense its arrival... he could feel its cold, malignant presence as it seeped through him like some insidious poison and took control of his body. ^ But Aoshi couldn't think about what was happening to himself at the moment.

(Misao! ^ She's too close...!)

He ruthlessly pried her arms away from him. ^ As he desperately clung to the last remnants of control over his body, he flung the girl in Tokio's direction before sagging to his hands and knees.

-----

Even though she was drowning in happiness and relief, Misao instantly knew that something had gone terribly wrong. ^ She jerked her gaze upward, frantic to find out what was wrong now. ^ Her eyes widened as she caught the sudden desperation in Aoshi's eyes. ^

The next thing she knew, she was sprawling at Tokio's feet. ^ Saitoh's wife swiftly helped her up, but kept a firm grasp on the girl's shoulder.

Sano raced to Tokio's side and shouted, "What the hell...!?"

At the moment, Aoshi gracefully rose to his feet, kodachi in hand. ^ He turned to face Tokio and Misao, then smiled faintly as he spoke.

"I should have known that the Miburo's bitch would have fangs of her own."

Misao stiffened. ^ The voice was Aoshi's, but the cool, malicious words certainly were not. ^ However, it didn't sound much like Minobe Junichi, either. ^ Junichi's speech tended to be smug and arrogant. ^ What was coming from Shinomori Aoshi's mouth was something else altogether. ^ Misao was deathly afraid that she knew exactly who -- or what -- the true speaker was.

Yahiko stared at Aoshi and yelled, "What the matter with you, Aoshi!?"

Misao's flat, angry voice cut through the boy's questions like a hot knife.

"That's not Aoshi talking. ^ It's the same thing that's happened with Kaoru, only this time it's not Junichi in control. ^ It's the demon

inside of Kinslayer. "Aijoh wo hametsu shi tsukusu gaki"

Yahiko and Sano stared blankly at Misao.

Tokio murmured calmly, "It means 'The Love-Eater'."

Sano growled, "What the hell sort of name is THAT!?"

"An appropriate enough name for a demon that feeds on the misery and suffering caused by the destruction of a person's loved ones," Tokio replied.

"Misao helped Aoshi break free of that mind trap of yours! How can you just pop up and steal his body, damn it!? That's not fair!" growled Yahiko.

"Fair? You surely don't think I would give up a killer like Shinomori Aoshi for the interest of fairness." Seeing any sort of smile on Aoshi's face would have been unnerving enough, but the pure malevolence in the man's current facial expression was truly frightening to behold.

Turning its attention back to Tokio, the demon murmured, "Clever, clever bitch...."

Sano glanced quickly at Saitoh's wife, then back at Aoshi. "What are you talking about?"

"For finding a way to flush me out into the open."

Tokio glanced at Sano. "As long as Aoshi was trapped in that mental prison the demon created, he could not contest its control of his body. But now that he's awake and aware of what's going on, the demon has to take direct possession in order to retain control. Aoshi's too valuable a tool to lose."

Sano glanced at Tokio in surprise.

(Forget not being harmless! She might be even more ruthless than Saitoh!)

More than a little shaken by that abrupt realization, the fighter muttered, "Then all this stuff helping Misao... it was all just a plan to make this Love-Eater demon to show himself? She could have gotten herself killed!" Sano sounded outraged.

Tokio shook her head. "I had no particular desire for this to occur, but it was probably inevitable."

"Inevitable? Why is it inevitable?" Sano demanded angrily.

"Are you certain you want to discuss this matter, here and now?" Tokio murmured to Sano as she pointed toward the possessed Aoshi.

"Uh... no."

Aoshi chuckled coldly. "As you can see, the bitch is cunning and as ruthless as her mate."

Tokio said quietly, "I'll take that as a compliment." She turned back to Sano. "There's nothing we can do about the demon's control of his body, but with Misao's help, we managed to save Aoshi's sanity."

Misao interrupted sharply, "Of course I knew it was dangerous, Sano, but I was willing to take the risk! I'm NOT a child!"

Aoshi murmured, "Such spirit. It's a pity you didn't accept Junichi's offer. It's your refusal that caused all of Aoshi's recent suffering," said the demon with a vicious smile.

Yahiko glanced at Misao, who had gone frighteningly pale, and asked, "Offer? What offer?"

Misao growled, "Junichi wanted me to voluntarily wound myself with Kinslayer in exchange for Aoshi's life. I would have ended up being possessed like Aoshi and Kaoru, but much, much worse."

Sano looked stunned. "And you didn't accept!? But I thought...."

She whipped around and glared at the fighter. In a fierce voice, she bit out, "Aoshi risked his life to free me from Kinslayer's power once before. He made a choice between his life and my freedom. I chose to honor that decision the only way I knew how. If I am at fault, that is a matter between Aoshi and me ALONE."

With those words, she turned away to warily watch the man she loved. In doing so, she missed Yahiko's stunned and nearly awestruck stare.

Sano gave her a long look. He saw the pain in her eyes, but also the strength of will that was more formidable than any blade. From that point on, no matter what he might say or do, Sagara Sanosuke knew that he would never view Makimachi Misao as a child again.

-----  
There was another person who would never view Misao as a child. Aoshi's body might be serving the demon's whims, but not his mind. He could clearly hear the exchange between Misao and Sano.

(Oh, Misao....)

If he had not loved her before, he probably have fallen in love with her at that moment.

(At fault? Never. Seeing you now... I regret nothing. NOTHING. Whatever I have suffered, I would gladly endure a hundred times over to give you your freedom....)

(Hannya, Beshimi, Hyottoko, Shikijo.... Can you see her now? Her strength? See what we've raised and nurtured.... Our Misao....)

(MY Misao....)  
-----

Tokio's expression did not change, but inwardly she was smiling.

(You do have the fire, little one. ^ And for that, I and my family will do our utmost to bring your Aoshi back to you.)

-----

The demon drawled, "How very moving, Misao. ^ It's a pity that you'll never have the opportunity to test your resolve."

Without warning, there were sounds of movement throughout the buildings surrounding the potters' market. ^ Doors began to slide open and people began to shuffle outside, their faces blank and lifeless. ^ Men and women, young and old... even children.

Tokio, Misao, Sano, and Yahiko were instantly surrounded, but once they were encircled, the people stumbled to a halt about thirty feet away.

"Shit!" growled Sano clenching his fists. ^ He was about to step forward to the attack when Tokio spoke.

"I wouldn't recommend doing that."

"Why not!?"

"Looks are deceptive. ^ They are not human, living or dead. ^ They're not flesh and blood of any sort."

"Then what the hell are they!?"

Tokio raised an eyebrow as she brushed her long black hair back from her face. ^

"This is an area full of pottery shops. And where you have pottery...."

Yahiko muttered as he tightened his grip on his shinai. ^ "Where you have pottery, you have clay. ^ Are you saying that all these things are made of clay!?"

"Probably. If you physically attack these things, there's no way of knowing how they will react. ^ They could fall apart at the slightest touch." ^ Tokio cocked her head slightly. ^ "Or they could swallow you whole."

By this time, more of the same gangly monsters that had tried to attack Misao had appeared. ^ Fading in and out of sight, they clustered behind Aoshi and waited, their huge clawed hands flexing in anticipation.

-----

As Sano, Misao, and Yahiko tensely awaited an attack, an eerie hush seemed to settle over the entire area. ^

"Oh shit! ^ Not again!" ^ By this time, Sano was starting to dread

those strange moments of quiet because bad and unnatural things usually ended up happening. ^ The last time something like this had happened, Kenshin's sakabatou had transformed into a normal sword and the Hitokiri Battousai had returned with a vengeance. ^ There was no telling what would occur this time.

A cold, biting wind started to blow and what little light there was began to fade. ^ Only Tokio kept her composure as the demon's creatures suddenly turned and stared down the street. ^

Sano, Yahiko, and Misao also turned to look. ^ At first they could see nothing except a few dim house lamps burning in the distance, then those few sources of light started to disappear. ^ Soon they all faded from view, except for two amber orbs glimmering in the darkness....

Then they saw it... a thick mass of dark mist that steadily flowed down the street toward them. ^ As it came ever closer, Sano thought he could see things in the fog... lean, four-footed shapes prowling forward on misty paws....

He shook himself sharply.

(Hell, I'm imagining things. ^ I've got to be!)

The smaller forms seem to coalesce, merging to form a single large form that threatened to dwarf the houses around them. ^ And were those amber lights he had seen really distant street lamps... or were they something else? ^

Something like... eyes?

Yahiko gasped as a ripple passed through the cloud of mist, pulling it into fine, long streamers that were strangely reminiscent of feathers... or fur.

Although the possessed Aoshi merely turned to watch the shadowy mass so rapidly approaching, the monsters behind him began to shuffle their feet nervously. ^ Sano could understand the feeling perfectly. ^ Something was coming... something powerful and terrible.

Misao choked out, "Oh no... it... it can't be!"

Sano was about to demand that Misao explain what 'it' was, but his questions abruptly became irrelevant.

IT appeared... the misty, yet unmistakable form of a giant wolf, its amber eyes glowing in the gathering darkness.

And out of the dark mist, directly under the great beast's grinning jaws, stepped Saitoh Hajime, his lips curling with the exact same predatory grin as his amber eyes gleamed with cold anticipation.

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> (end of part 22) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: ^ Well, Saitoh gets to really show his fangs and Kenshin's

hidden soul continues to awaken.   Â No, the story isn't going to end just yet.   Â =^\_ ^=

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS:   Â A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>

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> Part 23:   Â THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE<br>

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[ Kyoto, mid-August, 1878 (11th year of the Meiji period) ]

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The cold wind blowing through the deserted streets of Kyoto did nothing to dissipate the ghostly form of the great wolf hovering before Sano and the others.   Â And the lean, unmistakable form of Saitoh Hajime was no mere illusion either.   Â

"Wha... what the hell...!?" gurgled Sano.

It was bad enough that Saitoh heard the nervousness in his own voice -- that was obvious from the way his malicious grin widened just a fraction --   Â but Sano couldn't suppress a shiver when he saw the grin on the ghostly wolf's face widen simultaneously.   Â It was NOT a reassuring sight.

(That thing's only smoke and fog... I hope... but if that's true, how can those huge fangs look so damn sharp....?)

Beside him, Yahiko muttered, "Oh man....."

"Do you guys remember about something.... strange was going on with Saitoh," Misao whispered hoarsely.

Sano managed to pry his gaze away from Saitoh and the wolf-shaped mist that hovered over the man like a dark and ominous aura -- an aura reeking with menace and impending bloodshed.

"Is THAT what you were talking about!?" Sano demanded hoarsely as he pointed in Saitoh's direction.

Misao whispered, "I... I can't be sure.... but I think... uh, Kaoru and Aoshi aren't the only ones being possessed...."

Sano and Yahiko could only stare blankly at her, but before she could explain, Aoshi uttered a low, hateful laugh.

"So you've finally awakened from your long slumber, oh great Hunter of Darkness."   Â The mockery in Aoshi's voice made every word a blatant insult.   Â "I was wondering how long it would take for you to crawl out of your lair."

Saitoh uttered a contemptuous snort, quite unmoved by the demon's words.   Â As he leisurely stalked toward the others, the misty apparition of the great wolf gradually collapsed back into a



formless, roiling mass of fog that seeped across the ground like a dark, thigh-high blanket of darkness. "But if one looked closely, one could almost catch a fleeting glimpse of what could be lean, predatory forms lurking within."

The shadowy mist poured forward, then abruptly halted about ten feet away from the spot where Aoshi and the semi-invisible monsters stood. "Without hesitation, the fog parted, circling around the possessed man and the creatures like a pack of wolves surrounding its chosen prey. "The demon's minions, so confident a few minutes ago, now cowered nervously near Aoshi, taking great care to stay within the small area not shrouded by the dark mist. "Occasionally, a bold tendril of fog would crept into that cleared space, only to be driven back by a casual slash of Aoshi's kodachi."

The darkness reached Sano, Yahiko, and Misao before they could react. Swiftly swirling around their legs, it seemed harmless enough. "The fog did nothing to stop them from moving, but any idiot could tell that there was something most uncanny about it. "And although Sano couldn't really see anything in the shadowy murk, every so often he thought he felt something brushing against him or a faint nudge against his leg."

The fighter glanced over at Tokio to see her reaction to Saitoh's appearance. "Unlike Misao and Yahiko who couldn't help twitching nervously every time there was a suspicious ripple in the fog, Tokio stood quite still -- a serene statue with a calm, yet acutely thoughtful expression on her face."

(Doesn't ANYTHING rattle that woman? "Any normal female would be scared out of her mind! "Hell, -I- don't know how much more of this weirdness I can take! "How can she just stand there like nothing's happened!)" Sano thought resentfully.

An icy shiver ran down his spine as Tokio's gaze flicked briefly in his direction, almost as if she had overheard Sano's last thoughts. "Whatever was causing that discreet gleam in her eyes, Sano was pretty sure that it wasn't fear."

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Saitoh halted only a few yards away from the possessed Aoshi and monsters. "As his lips curved upward in that familiar malicious smile, the unnatural creatures whimpered softly, terror obvious on their bestial faces. "The demon, lurking in Aoshi's body, coldly ignored them."

"And now here I am."

"Yes, but doing what? "Do you mean to tell me that you actually intend to waste your time protecting a herd of stupid mortals?" the demon said scornfully. "Quite a fall for one who was once the terror of my kind."

"Protecting humans? "Oh, but I'm not," Saitoh said with a decided smirk.

"What?" the demon scowled irritably. The sight of such obvious negative emotions on the usually impassive Aoshi's face was rather

disturbing, to say the least.

"I guard. A subtle, but significant difference." A Saitoh gave the demon a sinister smile.

The demon shrugged Aoshi's shoulder and snapped, "Whatever. A But why waste your time on such a trivial and meaningless task?"

Saitoh shrugged nonchalantly and drawled, "Deciding what is worthy of my time is strictly my prerogative. A And speaking of wasting one's time... at least I didn't spend over three hundred years sealed inside a damp cave somewhere, and then another four centuries stuck inside a sword."

The demon drew Aoshi's lips back in a snarl of rage. A "You DARE to bring up that matter! A Seven hundred years of imprisonment and all YOUR doing, Hunter!"

Saitoh laughed scornfully. A "My doing? A Idiot. A That mess was entirely your own fault. A You were the one who betrayed his own ally, Minobe Fuumi, all those centuries ago. A He simply took his own revenge by sealing you away while you were still weakened from our last battle. A And I had nothing to do with you getting stuck inside Kinslayer for all these years. A You did that yourself through your own cowardice and haste. A In your rush to hide yourself from detection and revenge yourself on the Minobe family, you never bothered to consider the consequences of binding yourself so thoroughly to an inanimate object. A So don't talk to me about blame."

-----  
As Sano struggled to follow the bizarre conversation going on between the demon and Saitoh, he couldn't help thinking, (Just who -- or what -- is doing the talking here? A Saitoh or the Hunter thing that demon keeps referring to? A I know the demon's controlling Aoshi -- there's no way he'd act like that on his own! -- but Saitoh.... A The bastard's pretty much behaving like he always does! A If it wasn't for all that weird supernatural shit with this fog and all the talk about stuff that happened hundreds of years ago....) A

-----  
"Of course, you're to blame! A You and your relentless pursuit... your refusal to leave me alone.... A And for what? A Mere mortals who breed like rabbits anyway?"

"To maintain order, that is the duty I have taken. A Those who disrupt that order by sowing destruction and chaos shall be destroyed." A A cold, hungry grin appeared on Saitoh's face. A "Besides, I enjoy the hunt."

The demon raised Aoshi's blood-smeared kodachi. A "I see. A So now that you've finally tracked me down, I assume you're here to destroy me."

Misao inhaled sharply and tensed.

"No," Saitoh coolly retorted.

The demon narrowed Aoshi's eyes and snapped, "What do you mean, 'no'?  
Â Has the fabled Hunter of the dark become nothing more than a craven street cur?"

"Hardly. Â What do you take me for? Â A fool?" was Saitoh's scornful reply. Â "Do you think I can't tell the difference between a weapon and the hand who wields it? Â Killing Shinomori would be a waste of my time. Â I want YOU, not your puppet."

The demon sneered, "And you're so sure that your puppet can defeat mine?"

"You know I can. Â Between the damage the Weasel Girl, your own creatures, and Tokio have done, Shinomori's in no shape to fight. Â More importantly, with all the schemes you have going on, you've spread yourself dangerously thin. Â Aside from having to maintain control of that fool Junichi so he doesn't end up getting prematurely slaughtered by the Battousai, you also have to deal with an unwilling host. Â Shinomori's not about to sit back and let you do as you please with his body." Â

Saitoh grinned nastily, before continuing. Â "But I don't have that problem. Â No, I wouldn't have any difficulty killing Shinomori, but I have my eyes on a much more important goal... and so have you."

The demon narrowed Aoshi's eyes and murmured, "Indeed."

"Your choice -- we can continue playing games with each other from here to eternity, or we can finish the matter, once and for all, two days from now," Saitoh said with a shrug.

Yahiko frowned. Â (Two days from now? Â What's so important about that date...? Â Hold it! Â Bon, the festival for the dead, takes place two days from today! Â Of course!)

The boy blurted, "So happens at Bon?"

"The Love-Eater will be powerful enough to free itself from Kinslayer," Saitoh casually replied.

"What!?" Sano and Yahiko shouted in unison.

"You want... you WANT that to happen!? Â You WANT it to go free!?" shrieked Misao.

"Of course." Â With a sly smile, Saitoh turned back to face the demon inside Aoshi. Â "Kinslayer is both sanctuary and prison for you. Â As long as you're trapped in that sword, I can't destroy you." Â He grinned maliciously. Â "But by the same token, you don't have the power to destroy me, either. Â So at this moment, any confrontation would be a waste of time and effort for both of us."

Sano yelled, "You're going to let that thing just... just walk away!? Â What about your "Aku Soku Zan" shit you keep going on about!?"

"Feh," snorted Saitoh.

"And what makes you so certain that... that demon's going to stick around to face you at Bon!? Â What's to keep it from agreeing to this fight, then running away, never to be seen again?" Misao shouted.

(What if it disappears... and takes Aoshi with it?)

The demon glared at her and snapped viciously, "Stupid little bitch."

Although she knew it was the demon speaking, Misao couldn't help flinching at the malice in Aoshi's voice.

Saitoh chuckled. Â "Oh, but it can't afford to run away. Â It has too much to lose, don't you?"

The look of frustration and barely suppressed rage on Aoshi's face confirmed the accuracy of Saitoh's words.

"First, now that I have the Love-Eater's scent again, there's no place it can go where I can't find it. Â Second, the binding between it and Kinslayer can only be broken in the same place where it was forged -- here in Kyoto. Â Virtually everything it has done so far -- the disruptions at the local shrines, terrorizing Kyoto's inhabitants with ghostly apparitions, the revival of bloody memories of the Bakumatsu no Douran... all done to build the atmosphere of fear and suffering necessary to accomplish its long-awaited escape. Â But if it misses this opportunity, it might have to wait another hundred years or more before conditions are right for another attempt." Â

Saitoh smiled with malevolent cheerfulness before continuing. Â "And that's the very last thing you want to do. Â It's so limiting to be trapped in an inanimate object, isn't it? Â You can't go anywhere on your own. Â You can only use a fraction of your power. Â Most of all, you miss not having a real physical body of your own. Â After all, there's nothing quite like the taste and the smell of fear and freshly spilled blood, is there? Â The feel of flesh shredding underneath one's fangs and claws?"

At that moment, one of the demon's minions strayed a bit too far from Aoshi's side. Â In a dark flash, several wolf-like forms erupted from the swirling fog, sank their fangs into the monster, and dragged it down into the seething darkness. Â Everyone could hear the bestial shrieks of agony intertwined with low snarls and the crunching of bones. The demon did nothing, but merely watched with a pensive expression on Aoshi's face. Â Suddenly the monster managed to partially claw its way out of the deadly fog as blackish blood poured from innumerable wounds on its body. Â Just as it appeared that the creature might escape, it was relentlessly dragged back down into the concealing mist. Â

During the ensuing carnage, the feral smile lingered on Saitoh's lips as his amber eyes glittered in the dim light.

There were a few more sickening noises, then all was quiet. Â Finally, the demon said thoughtfully, "Quite true. Â You understand too well, but that's only to be expected. Â We're not all that different, Hunter."

"I never claimed to be."

Aoshi's voice was taut with tightly controlled rage as the demon hissed, "Then you should understand just how much I LOATHE you. ^ To be locked away and deprived of the bloody pleasures which are my very sustenance for seven long centuries.... ^ You and the Minobe clan bear the blame -- you with your endless harassment and the Minobe for their treachery. ^ Soon the destruction of the Minobe clan will be complete, but as long as you exist, I will have no peace. ^ I know you, as you know me. Now that you have found me again, you're ready to hound me to the ends of the earth and time, if need be. ^ No matter where I go, you will be lurking in the shadows, waiting for an opportunity to sink your fangs into my flesh and torment me further."

"Absolutely," Saitoh calmly replied.

"Very well. ^ Then let us settle this forever, Hunter. ^ The festival of Bon, it is. ^ Two days from now. ^ And if you know so much of my plans, then you know where."

Saitoh gave a brief nod of acknowledgment.

The demon smiled cruelly. ^ "We were too evenly matched before, Hunter, but seven hundred years of hatred and rage has only made my powers grow. ^ What about you? ^ Has your strength increased or waned over the passing centuries?"

"We shall see, won't we?" replied Saitoh.

As the demon turned away, Saitoh drawled, "By the way...."

It glanced over Aoshi's shoulder and gave Saitoh a suspicious look.

"At this moment, the Battousai's busy chasing Kamiya Kaoru around Kyoto. ^ You might consider the consequences if he manages to catch up with her. ^ I don't think you want Kinslayer falling into the Battousai's hands. ^ Trying to take the sword away from him is likely to prove surprisingly difficult."

As the demon continued to stare at Saitoh, it snarled, "There's no way he can get that sword away from the Kamiya girl."

"Of course he can. ^ It's quite easy. ^ All he has to do is kill her."

The demon sneered. ^ "Kill her? ^ He's sickeningly in love with that female."

Saitoh smiled evilly and replied, "Exactly my point."

The Love-Eater opened Aoshi's mouth to make a nasty remark, then the expression on Aoshi's face turned strangely thoughtful. ^ Then for some unknown reason, it turned to stare at Misao for a long moment. ^

-----

Misao felt a chill run down her spine as the demon directed its gaze

toward her. ^ She did her best to ignore the contempt and disdain that marred Aoshi's expression. ^ Instead, she concentrated on his eyes, searching for some sign of the man she loved.

She looked for it... and she found it.

Perhaps the emotional maelstrom that she had endured the last few days -- or maybe it was because she loved and now knew that she was loved in turn -- that made her more observant and sensitive about other people's emotions.

Aoshi was in THERE, somewhere. ^ Just like with Kaoru, he knew exactly what was going on around him and what his body was doing -- he simply couldn't do anything about it. ^ But she could deal with that. ^ It was horrible, but certainly much better than watching Aoshi driven into insanity by misplaced guilt and a demon's lies.

-----

Deprived of any control over his physical body, Aoshi felt a thoroughly unfamiliar emotion.

Stark panic.

If the pain and torment he had been recently through was any example of the demon's cruelty and malice, Aoshi dreaded to think what sort of atrocities the demon might have in mind for Misao.

And what -- if anything -- could he do about it? ^ At the moment, the answer was both simple and totally unacceptable. ^

Not much.

All through the conversation with Saitoh, Aoshi prowled restlessly in his mind as he searched for a way to regain what the demon had taken, but the barrier that separated him from his body seemed impenetrable. ^ Mentally and emotionally exhausted, he had been dangerously close to giving up, when Saitoh's -- or was it the Hunter's? -- words had provided Aoshi with a slim glimmer of hope.

(No, I'm NOT totally helpless. ^ It seems that an unwilling host can resist the demon's possession. ^ Perhaps I won't be able to free myself, but I CAN interfere with the demon's use of my body. ^ That's why the demon tried to make believe that I murdered Misao. ^ That's why it tried to trick and threaten her into voluntarily surrendering her blood and her soul,) Aoshi thought furiously.

Now he knew it was possible to fight back, but how? ^ What sort of weapon could he use against this demon? ^

He might not have control of his body, but thanks to Misao, he now had control of his own mind. ^ However, some instinct told him that cold logic and reason alone would not be enough. ^ He needed something more....

Almost reluctantly, Aoshi remembered that that there was more to a person than just a physical body and a mind. ^ There were two more components to a human being, even though he did his best to ignore those things as much as possible.

A heart and a soul.

His mind would be his weapon against the demon, but it was the emotion from his heart and soul that would provide the strength behind that weapon.

It was an uncomfortable idea. All through his childhood, Aoshi had been taught that emotions were dangerous -- something to be restrained and controlled at all times. They were a weakness all too easily exploited by others. Emotions made one careless and vulnerable.

The events of the last year only served to strengthen the stern lessons of his childhood. His grief, guilt, and anger over the deaths of Hannya and the others had led him into obsession. His feelings, raging out of control, had caused him to sacrifice nearly everything -- his honor, his pride, the people who cared about him.... It had been the desperate need to restore the old mental discipline, to rebuild his protective inner walls, that caused him to withdraw from everyone, especially Misao, after Shishio's defeat.

The traumatic events of the last several days had steadily chipped away at a lifetime's worth of emotional restraint and control. But now he was out of time and out of options. Somehow, in the space of two days, he had to learn to accept the truths within his own heart and soul. Only then could he be strong enough to fight the demon from within.

But could he do it without destroying himself?

It certainly wasn't impossible. Misao made no effort to hide how she felt about people and it didn't do her any real harm. In fact, she seemed to draw strength from her very openness. And while she was certainly impulsive, it wasn't a destructive impulsiveness that injured herself or others.

On the other hand, he had come to realize that Misao had more inner strength than he had ever given her credit for. For far too long, he had merely thought of her as a flighty, somewhat frivolous young girl who would eventually grow out of a childhood infatuation. The last few days had proven just how wrong he had been about her. He wasn't sure if he had her type of strength.

Strangely enough, the Love-Eater's vicious mind game had not tempted him to retreat further behind a wall of indifference, nor had it caused him to deny his feelings for Misao. Instead, it had shown him that all his efforts to keep her at a safe emotional distance had only made Misao miserable and unhappy. She deserved so much more. And with the type of life they both led, he could lose her so easily....

Aoshi had never thought of himself as a coward, but the prospect of wrestling with his own long-repressed emotions was enough to make him falter and hesitate. Finding the balance between his mind and his heart could be the most difficult task he had ever undertaken. If the stakes were not so high... if Misao's life and more were not at risk....

Difficult or not, he had to succeed. ^ He might not be able to break free from the demon's control, but he might be able to give Misao and the others the opportunity to destroy this sickening monster they called the Love-Eater.

With that decided, now what? ^ He was used to meditating in order to distance himself from his emotions. ^ So how did one set about getting in touch with one's innermost feelings? ^ He had better figure out something and do it out soon.

Time was running out. ^ He had two days.

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The tension steadily grew as the demon continued to stare thoughtfully at Misao. ^ She met its stare unflinchingly as she quietly placed her hand on the tanto stuck in her sash. ^ Finally, Sano had enough of the staring contest and moved to step between Misao and the demon. ^ But to his surprise, he couldn't budge. ^ The black fog that had been drifting so harmlessly around his legs suddenly had the consistency of impossibly thick mud.

(What the hell...?) ^ Sano glared at Saitoh, who watched the silent confrontation between Misao and the possessed Aoshi with an anticipatory, almost hungry gleam in his amber eyes.

(The bastard! ^ Saitoh... the Hunter... whoever it is WANTS the Love-Eater to attack Misao. ^ But why...? ^ Of course. ^ If the demon goes after Misao, the Hunter gets an easy shot at it. ^ Why pass up the opportunity? ^ After all, compared to the Love-Eater, that blasted Hunter spirit really has nothing to lose either way....)

Just as Sano was about to start yelling obscenities in Saitoh's direction, Tokio moved effortlessly through the fog to stand behind Misao, then quietly placed her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Feh," snorted Saitoh in a tone of mild annoyance and disappointment, then dropped his hand to his katana.

The demon's gaze flicked in Saitoh's direction. ^ It nodded curtly in his direction, then the possessed Aoshi leapt effortlessly to a nearby roof. ^ As soon as he left the ground, whatever force or barrier that had been holding back the black fog vanished. ^ The mist poured over the monsters like a hungry tsunami and sucked them under as the beasts howled in fear and despair. ^ As the dark mist seethed and boiled, nothing could be seen except an occasional glimpse of an inhuman limb groping frantically for freedom or a spurt of demonic blood.

From the sanctuary of the rooftop, the demon coldly watched the slaughter of its minions as if to evaluate this demonstration of the Hunter's power. ^ Then, without a single qualm, the demon left its servants to their fate.

After the possessed Aoshi disappeared from view, Saitoh turned his attention back to Sano and the others.

Yahiko raised his shinai and stared defiantly at him.



"Who... what the hell ARE you!?"

Saitoh stared at the boy and said coolly, "I am that which I have always been."

"No way! ^ Who are you trying to fool!? ^ And what was all that shit about Kenshin killing Kaoru!?" ^ The boy fought down a childish impulse to shout 'Take it back!'.

Saitoh looked down at the indignant boy and smirked.

"It's very possible, in the right circumstances."

"I don't believe you! ^ Kenshin would never do anything like that!"

With a bored look on his face, Saitoh drawled, "Then I ask you this. ^ If the Weasel Girl really believed that killing Shinomori would save him from a fate worse than death, do you think she'd have the guts to slit Shinomori's throat herself?"

Misao gasped, yanking her hand away from her tanto. ^ In response to her frantic glance, Tokio gave the girl a soothing pat on the shoulder.

A few days ago, before the appearance of Kinslayer, Yahiko would have laughed at Saitoh's question. ^ The idea of Misao hurting Aoshi, much less killing him, would have been utterly ridiculous.

(But when he puts it THAT way... if she really thought there was no other choice... if she really thought that it was the best thing for him.... ^ I mean, the way she turned down the demon's offer... not for herself, but for him.... ^ Yeah, I guess she would do it, no matter the cost.)

As if he could read Yahiko's thoughts, Saitoh continued relentlessly. ^ "So are you telling me that the Battousai would have less courage than a sixteen year old, half-trained ninja girl?"

"N-n-no.... ^ But... but how can he... he cares about Kaoru so much...."

Saitoh sighed in exasperation. ^ "You mean he loves her. ^ Which is, as I told that moronic demon, the precise reason why he may be prepared to kill her."

"And what the hell would a psycho... a psycho whatever-you-are like YOU know about love, anyway!?" yelled Sano furiously.

Saitoh narrowed his eyes and smiled unpleasantly at Sano. ^ "More than you're ever likely to figure out, dumbass."

With those words, Saitoh stalked purposefully over toward Tokio. ^ His way was momentarily blocked by the animated clay figures surrounding her and the others. ^ However, they abruptly crumbled out of his path, torn into harmless little chunks by the ravenous mist. ^ He halted a few feet from Tokio to examine her, his amber gaze missing nothing -- the torn clothes, the bruises and the cuts on her body, the blood on her face.... ^

Then, without warning, he took a firm grip on Tokio's shoulders....

....and kissed her.

Sano, Yahiko, and Misao gaped in utter disbelief.

It was an incredibly sensuous kiss, the likes of which the three stunned onlookers had never seen before. ^

It smoked. ^ It smoldered. ^ It was the sort of kiss that if one tried to sketch it, the paper would probably go up in flames.

Sano waved his hands in front of Yahiko's and Misao's eyes. ^ The kids were too young to see this sort of thing. ^ Hell, Sano didn't know if HE was old enough to be watching this.

Blushing furiously, both Yahiko and Misao yanked Sano's hands aside. ^ With dumbfounded expressions, they continued to stare at the sight of Saitoh passionately kissing Tokio. ^ Without breaking off the kiss, Saitoh absently ran his fingers through her disheveled hair and pulled out the last few pins that had once held her hair in a very tidy bun, allowing the long black strands to cascade over his hands like liquid silk.

It was all gloriously uninhibited, but what made that particular kiss so enthralling was the sheer intensity of emotion. ^ Not mere passion or lust, but even to the three onlookers' inexperienced eyes, it was something much more profound... a feeling that encompassed both the spirit and the flesh.

Of the three onlookers, Misao understood what she was witnessing the best. ^ When Aoshi had held her in his arms... when he had said that he loved her... she had had a tantalizing hint of this very same feeling. ^ And if fortune favored her and Aoshi, she would have the chance to experience it fully someday. ^ This type of love would not come cheaply. ^ It promised great joy but also demanded a willingness to make terrible sacrifices. ^

Misao was already well aware of that. ^

Still, to see something so blatantly... emotional?... erotic, even?... going on between Saitoh and Tokio left Misao in a massive state of shock.

Finally, after an apparent eternity, the kiss ended. ^ Saitoh eyed Tokio with an air of smug satisfaction and said, "It's been too long since I've done that," as he absently licked away a small smear of her blood from his lips.

As he loosened his grip on Tokio, she blinked, then reached for one of her fans. ^ With a snap of the wrist, she flicked the lethal weapon open and briskly began to fan her slightly flushed face as she breathlessly murmured, "Well... quite... eight years, to be precise...."

Saitoh turned to find Sano, Misao, and Yahiko still goggling at them, their mouths agape with utter amazement. ^ He calmly raised a thin eyebrow and spoke in his usual cool, sarcastic voice as if nothing

out of the ordinary had occurred.

"So what are YOU idiots staring at?"

And on a nearby rooftop, a large raven shook its head and uttered an almost human sigh before breaking into a loud cackle, almost as if it was laughing itself silly.

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> (end of part 23) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: ^ ^ The focus finally shifts to Kenshin and Kaoru! ^ Does Junichi finally get a clue to what's really going on? ^

And I just wanted to remind you that this NOT a darkfic... ^ Well, to be more accurate, ^ this story is not a SADfic. ^ ^ =^\_ ^=

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## 9. Part 24

Rurouni Kenshin - "That Which Lingers" (Part 24) by Madamhydra

Last major revision: ^ 05/29/99

> Last modified: ^ 0504/00

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> This story is set in my own ALTERNATE REALITY Rurouni Kenshin universe which I've called "The Nightwitch Tales" -- think of it as Rurouni Kenshin mixed with various supernatural and paranormal elements. ^ It takes place after the end of the Kyoto story arc. ^ After that, all bets are off. ^ Other stories in this alternate reality are: "Night Visitor"; "All in the Family"; and "Romancing the Wolf". ^ <p>

WARNING: ^ This story is "semi-dark" -- it has dark elements (violence, profanity, etc.) but it's not a darkfic! ^ Actually, there's quite a bit of romance in it.... ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ \_-

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> THAT WHICH LINGERS: ^ A Rurouni Kenshin Fanfic by MadamHydra<br>

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> Part 24: ^ SPIRITS IN THE MATERIAL WORLD<br>

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> Text Conventions<br> ( ^ ) are character thoughts  
> ^ represents mental dialogue<br> \* ----- \* ----- \* ^ marks the start/end of dreams or flashbacks  
> [ ] denote visual or time notes  
<p>

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[ Kyoto, mid-August, 1878 (11th year of the Meiji period) ]

As Sano, Yahiko, and Misao continued to stare dumbfoundedly at Saitoh -- he calmly released his grip on Tokio and imperiously lifted his arm. ^ They heard the barest whisper of wings as a large jet black raven swooped out of the dimness and settled on Saitoh's outstretched wrist.

"Make sure that idiot grandcub of mine doesn't screw things up," he said curtly.

The raven cocked its head.

He suddenly turned and stared at Misao. ^ A sinister smile -- unusually so even for Saitoh -- appeared on his lean face.^

Misao instinctively retreated a step.

"And then see what you can do with the Weasel Girl."

The raven glanced at Misao. ^ It seemed to sigh before bobbing its sleek black head once in acknowledgement. ^ Then with a single powerful sweep of its wings, the bird was airborne.

Saitoh watched the raven disappear into the murky, cloud-clogged sky, then turned on his heel and stalked purposefully toward Misao.

In a strangled voice, the girl croaked, "Wha... what do \*you\* want?" as she scuttled backward. ^ Saitoh was scary enough under normal circumstances, but the dark aura of power that now hovered over him made the man infinitely more intimidating.

Saitoh's feral grin widened. ^ Before she or the others could react, with uncanny swiftness, he grabbed Misao by the back of her neck and effortlessly hauled the girl into the air just like an errant puppy. ^ Ignoring her struggles and the sputtering Sano and Yahiko, he then headed off down the street with Misao still firmly in his clutches.

"What the hell are you doing, you bastard!" she shrieked, her outrage

finally overcoming her fear and nervousness.

"I've got plans for you, girl, and I don't want you wandering off in some half-witted attempt to find Shinomori." Â

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> ----- <p>

[elsewhere in Kyoto]

After leading the Battousai on a long, convoluted chase through Kyoto, Junichi paused for a moment to give Kaoru's body a chance to rest. Â Even with the sword's power, Kaoru's body could only be pushed so far. Â He took a quick peek backward, expecting to see the Battousai trailing far behind... but there was nobody there. Â Â A scowl appeared on Kaoru's face.

With a feeling of profound annoyance, Junichi wondered, (Where did he go to? Â Did he finally get tired and give up?) Â However, his thoughts were also tinged with relief. Â He was reluctant to admit it, but Junichi had been more than a little bothered by the Battousai's unexpected speed and stamina. Â With Kinslayer's magic, Kaoru shouldn't have too much trouble outpacing any mortal. Â However, it seemed that the Battousai was keeping up without too much effort. Â True, his enemy wasn't able to actually catch up, but still.... Â Junichi quickly shoved the thought aside as trivial.

He glanced around, but there was still no sign of his enemy. Â Finally, after impatiently waiting several minutes, Junichi swore in frustration and stalked off down the street. Â He had nearly been ready to end this chase anyway. Â Another block or more, and they would have been at the southern canal... the place where everything started thirteen years ago... the place where he would again challenge the Battousai. Â But this time, he would be the victor.

Junichi was desperately eager for this confrontation. Â He wanted to see the Battousai's guts spilling all over the ground. Â He wanted to see the Battousai begging for his life....

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Trapped in her mind, Kaoru was very much aware of Junichi's thoughts. Â She might have laughed at the sheer irrationality of his fantasies, but there was something else first and foremost thing on her mind.

The Hitokiri Battousai was back.

She felt her guts knot in dread and anxiety as she remembered her last good look at Kenshin. Â She would never forget the sight of him standing in the middle of a street strewn with corpses as a fine mist of blood settled ever so slowly out of the air.

And even more unforgettable was the ominous golden sheen in his eyes. Â If gold was supposed to be a warm color, then how could the Battousai's gaze seem so distant and so cold?

She didn't \*hate\* the Battousai, but the sight of those golden eyes filled her with foreboding because they symbolized a part of Kenshin that she did not know and felt no desire to know. ^ They meant that the Kenshin she knew was no longer there. ^

(No... that's not really true,) Kaoru reluctantly admitted to herself. ^ The Hitokiri was undeniably different from Kenshin... and yet, he wasn't a separate entity wholly distinct from Kenshin. ^

Perhaps that was what she found most frightening of all -- to think that the killer she had heard so many stories about and the rurouni that she had come to love could be so closely intertwined, even in her eyes. ^ Because if that was true, then that meant....

(I could never have the one without learning to accept the other....)

-----

Junichi wanted to destroy the Battousai NOW... but something kept holding him back. ^ He told himself that it wasn't fear or nervousness. ^ He was ready. ^ He had the skill and the power. ^ Why should he wait two more days until the festival of Bon?

(No. ^ I... I want to play with him a bit more. ^ Make him suffer.... ^ Yes, that's it. ^ The timing has to be just right....)

Fully occupied with his attempt to rationalize his lack of action, Junichi failed to pay attention to where he was going until he nearly fell into the canal that blocked his path.

For some strange reason, the bridge that had collapsed those thirteen years ago had never been rebuilt. ^ Instead, a new bridge had been constructed a few blocks to the east. ^ Junichi stood at the edge of the canal and stared down at the water. ^ There was no wreckage to be seen. ^ Two large stone blocks on each bank of the canal were the only traces that there had once been a major structure on this spot.

Suddenly, Kinslayer quivered urgently in its scabbard. ^ Junichi spun around, looking for danger. ^ At first, he could see nothing out of the ordinary. ^ The surrounding streets, normally full of bustling people, was empty. ^

(Cowering in their homes, no doubt, if they haven't fled the city already.)

Junichi tensed as he finally noticed a slim figure silently standing less than ten yards away. ^ Dressed in a dark navy jacket and hakama, the man was nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding shadows. ^ If it hadn't been for Kinslayer's warning, Junichi would have never noticed the other's presence until too late. ^ And although Junichi would have ardently denied it or characterized it merely as anticipation, he felt a faint shiver as the slim figure emerged into the dim light of the afternoon, revealing ominously familiar details....

....the long red hair caught up in a high ponytail....  
> ....the cold golden eyes that pinpointed every possible

weakness.... <p>

....and the deadly gleam of a katana.

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Kaoru's face twisted into a furious scowl as Junichi shouted, "How did you find me!?"

Kenshin didn't bother to reply to his opponent's childish ravings. Â It hadn't taken him long to detect the pattern in Junichi's movements... how the spirit possessing Kaoru's body seemed inexorably drawn to the canal where their first and only battle had occurred thirteen years ago, only to turn away at the last moment. Â But no matter how many times he had swerved away from the location, Junichi always headed back to the canal. Â The decision to cut short the chase had been a gamble, but one that had paid off.

As he watched the expression of baffled frustration on Kaoru's face, Kenshin could almost taste the darkness in the air -- the fear, bloodlust, and desperation that hung over Kyoto, just like it had over a decade ago during the Bakumatsu no Douran. Â It was as if returning to the persona of the Battousai had reawakened senses that had become blunted over the intervening decade of wandering.

That decision had not come easily. Â He had spent over a decade trying to separate himself from his past. Â And for the last several days he had been desperately struggling to cling to his new self... the man he had become in the years since the Douran. Â But a less idealistic and more coldly practical part of Kenshin kept telling him that he was squandering valuable energy on a futile battle -- energy he probably could not afford to waste -- as well as turning his back on badly needed advantages.

Sometime during the chase, he had come to a grim, but inescapable realization.

(I must go into this fight with a whole heart, not second-guessing myself... not constantly worrying if the Hitokiri is taking over or whether the Rurouni is strong enough. Â There is no hope for victory if I'm divided against myself. Â The Hitokiri is not the enemy. Â Junichi and his demon master are my true opponents. Â The killer is a part of me, just as the kindly wanderer I have tried so hard to be, and both are parts of Himura Kenshin. Â Whatever it takes to stop Junichi and his shadowy puppetmaster... if it means returning to the ways of the hitokiri... so be it. Â I must accept that. Â No holding back. Â No reservations. Â I cannot fail. Â I \*will\* not fail.)

In this particular fight, failure was totally unacceptable. Â A world ruled by such a monster is not worth living in. Â No, perhaps it was more accurate to say that such a world would not be worth \*existing\* in.

(But if I must kill, then I do so on my own terms and reasons, just as I did during the Douran. Â I will not be a mindless pawn in Junichi's game -- or rather, his demon master's game. Â I will not be controlled and ruled by my memories. Â Rather, my past will give me the weapons I need to win in the present. Â As for the future... I shall deal with that when it comes.)

Once his fateful decision had been made, Kenshin had stopped fighting the incessant pull of the past. ^ And if he did not eagerly embrace those memories of his old self, at least he accepted them and made them serve his own purposes. ^ And as his mind returned at least in part to its old patterns, things in the physical world also reverted to familiar patterns. ^ In some ways, it was as if the last ten years had never been.

Even as he absently retied his hair, a part of Kenshin couldn't help wonder if Kaoru could understand what he was doing. ^ What would she think of him and his newfound... no, his rediscovered willingness to take a human lives if necessary... possibly her own?

-----

Kaoru watched as the Battousai slowly stepped from the shadows, the drawn katana in his hand gleaming in the dim light of the afternoon.  
^

In response to Junichi's angry questions, he finally said, "With your obsession with revenge, it was an easy guess."

Kaoru could feel Junichi grinding her teeth in fury.

"And now that I'm here, we will settle matters once and for all."

"No!" Junichi snarled.

The Battousai narrowed his golden eyes and coldly said, "Why not?"

"B-b-because!" ^ Junichi's voice wavered uncertainly.

Kenshin continued his relentless advance. ^ "You fool. ^ You still haven't realized the truth yet, have you?"

"Realized what!?"

"That you're just a puppet in someone else's scheme."

"That's ridiculous! ^ You're the one who's the puppet! ^ You're the one dancing to a song of my choosing!"

"Your choosing... or your master's?"

"What are you talking about!? ^ I'm the master of the game here!"

The Battousai coldly retorted, "You call me a puppet, Minobe, but you are the one dangling from someone else's strings."

"No, that's not true! You're lying!" ^ Junichi shook Kaoru's head in frantic denial.

"Then prove otherwise," came Kenshin's sharp reply. ^ "End this now. ^ Or do you lack the courage?"



"No! ^ I told you, I'm not ready yet! ^ I... I have plans!"

"Like what?" the Battousai ruthlessly interrupted.

"Do you really think I'm going to tell you?" hissed Junichi.^ ^ ^ ^

The red-haired swordsman said in coldly scathing tones, "Perhaps you don't \*have\* any plans...."

"I do! ^ I do!" shouted Junichi, sounding more child-like with each passing second.

The Battousai continued relentlessly, "....because you really don't have the slightest idea of what's going on."

"You're wrong!" ^ Junichi actually stamped Kaoru's foot in a mixture of frustration and anger.

If Kenshin might have shaken his head in a mixture of sadness and exasperation, the Battousai did no such thing. ^ He would not give an opponent -- even one as hopeless-seeming as Junichi -- the slightest tactical advantage, no matter how small. ^

"Listen to yourself!" the Battousai snapped, "and then try to remember the man you were thirteen years ago. ^ You were one of the Shinsengumi, a member of the most feared and respected groups in Kyoto. ^ You might have been overly arrogant back then, but at least you weren't a complete idiot. ^ Now look at you, Minobe, whining and throwing a tantrum like a spoiled child, unable to come up with the simplest explanation or reason for any of your actions. ^ Who's the brainless puppet now?"

"You're... you're just trying to confuse me!"

"That's a pathetically easy thing to do. ^ Kinslayer may have given you the opportunity for revenge, but see what it's cost you -- your ability to reason, your courage, your self-respect, your humanity... everything."

"Shut up!"

"Whatever damage I might have done to your body is nothing compared to what Kinslayer and its' master have done to you. ^ They've crippled your spirit and your soul far more than anything I might have done."

"I told you to shut up!!!"

-----

As Kaoru listened to the conversation going on between Kenshin and Junichi, she wasn't sure what amazed her more -- the abrupt degeneration in Junichi's behavior or Kenshin's... well, Kenshin's apparent restraint.

(The last thing I expected was to hear the Battousai simply... talking. ^ Then again, how often have I really seen this side of Kenshin? ^ Only once, during that fight with Saitoh in the dojo. ^ But perhaps... perhaps I shouldn't be that surprised. ^ Perhaps I

was so upset, so caught up with Kenshin's ruthlessness and determination during that duel, I failed to notice what was really going on. Â Kenshin didn't go berserk. Â He wasn't mindlessly attacking Saitoh. Â He knew exactly what he was doing and he knew how best to accomplish that.)

Could it be that she had heard too many stories of the Battousai's ferocity and killing skill? Â Had she unconsciously bought into the legend of the blood-thirsty Hitokiri Battousai, a murderous monster that killed indiscriminately? Â

But she was beginning to see that the Battousai's deadliness did not solely reside in his sword arm, but also in the cold, calculating mind that guided that arm. Â Just like Kenshin, the Battousai understood his opponent -- the motivations and the reasons -- but while Kenshin often empathized with his opponent, the Battousai offered no sympathy or kindness whatsoever. Â He dragged Junichi's fears and uncertainties into the open, exposing them to his merciless scrutiny. Â

Oh, the Battousai understood Junichi all right, but it was the ruthless understanding a true predator had of its hapless prey.

Now that the Battousai had pointed it out so clearly, she realized that frightening dark presence that had been controlling Junichi for so long was strangely absent. Â It wasn't completely gone, but without its constant guidance, Junichi seemed much less dangerous and threatening.

(What's going on? Â It's almost as if that other presence has somehow been... distracted. Â But with what?)

With the controlling evil gone, she could clearly sense what Kenshin evidently had. Â If a person's mind was like a building, then Junichi's mind was a structure tottering on the verge of utter ruin, its walls and supports deliberately and systematically weakened by Kinslayer's manipulations. Â She could literally \*feel\* the gaps and holes in Junichi's thinking processes. Â

Hope surged in her heart. Â This could be her one chance to break free. Â With that thought, Kaoru attacked the mental barriers holding her prisoner within her own body with renewed vigor and determination.

-----

With a jolt, Junichi became aware that the Battousai had managed to come dangerously close. Â Kaoru's arms belatedly whipped Kinslayer up into a guard position.

"You cunning bastard!" Junichi shrieked, infuriated both at the Battousai and himself. Â "But you've forgotten the most important thing! Â I still have the girl!" Â Kaoru's lips curled into a most unladylike smirk as Junichi consoled himself with the thought that he still had the upper hand.

Something flared briefly in the Battousai's golden eyes, but that was all. Â The cold, unshakable purposefulness of his expression was far more unnerving than any display of anger or rage could be.

"There's no way to stop me without killing her!" Junichi taunted his opponent.

The Battousai said evenly, "If that becomes necessary, I will."

Junichi blinked in astonishment. "You... you're willing to KILL her!?" he shouted, sounding hopelessly baffled. "I thought you loved her!?"

As his long red ponytail fluttered in the faint breeze, Kenshin fixed his golden-eyed gaze upon Kaoru's face and simply said, "I do."

-----

Trapped inside her body, a stunned Kaoru mentally whispered,  
(Kenshin....) " "

She could not doubt the utter sincerity in his voice when he said that he loved her... nor could she doubt his sincerity when he said that he was willing to kill her.

For an instant, she was torn between joy and despair. "How often had she dreamed of hearing those words from Kenshin? But she had never dreamed that she would hear them from the Battousai. Did it really make a difference?

(Have I been lying to myself all this time? I kept telling myself that I didn't care about Kenshin's past... but I did. All the stories of death and murder... I couldn't help wondering how such a terrible killer have a heart. How could someone like that take so many lives and still have feelings? How could someone like that care about anyone else?)

With a guilty twinge, she wondered, (Did Kenshin know? Did he somehow guess how I felt, even though I didn't even realize it myself? Is that why he seemed so hesitant about getting close to me?)

(Maybe... maybe I've been wrong all this time. I've been thinking of Kenshin and the Battousai as two completely different people... but they're not. Kenshin... my Kenshin... he's still there, a part of the Battousai that stands before me, just as the Battousai is a part of Kenshin.) " "

But perhaps the mistake wasn't entirely her own fault. Perhaps it was partially Kenshin's fault, too. " "

(He's tried so hard to become someone different from the infamous Hitokiri Battousai. The Battousai had killed often, so Kenshin had chosen to never kill at all. If Kenshin himself turned away from the Battousai -- the killer within -- is it any wonder that the rest of us should do the same?)

But in trying to change, had Kenshin gone too far? If she was right and the Battousai was an integral part of Kenshin, then rejecting what the Battousai stood for meant that Kenshin was trying to reject a part of his own soul. It might not be a pretty or pleasant part, but it was a part nevertheless. And it was often said that an

incomplete soul could never know true happiness....

Could she accept Kenshin? Â Not just the gentle part of him, but the killer, too? Â

The mere act of killing itself wasn't automatically evil. Â She couldn't condemn a person just because they took another's life. Â

(Shinomori Aoshi, the other Oniwabanshuu, maybe even my own father before he developed the Kamiya Kasshin Ryu... they've probably all killed, but that doesn't make them monsters. Â I don't fear or hate them. Â Why should it be so different with Kenshin?)

(Perhaps because he's so good at it. Â Maybe that's what bothers me... he makes it seem so effortless.) Â She gazed at the Battousai. Â There was no eagerness, no anticipation. Â There was only... purpose, a determination to do what he deemed necessary. Â

(Looking at him now... I think I'm beginning to understand. Â The Battousai might be an expert at killing, but he doesn't do it casually. Â He doesn't \*enjoy\* taking people's lives. Â He kills because he believes that it's necessary to achieve the greater good....) Â

(If I had to... to protect someone I loved or an innocent person... if I had no choice....)

A part of herself whispered stubbornly, (There's always a choice! Â You can always choose not to kill!)

But was that really true? Â Was there always a choice? Â If Kenshin's or Yahiko's or Sano's life truly was at risk, she knew what she would do in an instant. Â It was a sobering realization for her.

(Are my hands unstained because I choose to follow the Kamiya Kasshin Ryu... or is it merely good luck? Â Is the Kamiya Kasshin Ryu really a luxury only possible in a more peaceful time... a time that was the result of the loss of so many lives and the sufferings of countless others?)

If she was willing to take a life out of love... to protect the people she cared for, how could she possibly scorn Kenshin for being prepared to do the very same?

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Kenshin continued, "But I will not permit your master to carry out its scheme to drown this city and country in blood and misery. Â No matter the cost."

"What the hell are you babbling about now!?"

"Exactly that. Â I'm talking about hell... here on earth. Â That's what your master wants."

"I have no master! Â This is between you and me!"

"Wrong. Â Your obsession and your aunt's obsession for revenge

against me allowed the demon to get a foothold in this world. "Do you really think that your desires mean anything to this monster?" "You're just a pawn in your demon master's grand scheme...."

Kenshin abruptly stiffened and whirled to his right, katana ready to strike.

"Quite true. "And a pawn that's just become expendable." "The voice was familiar to both Kaoru and Kenshin, but the vicious undertone of malice was not.

"You," Kenshin bit out as he stared upward to see Shinomori Aoshi calmly standing on the roof of a nearby building. "Like an obscene pack of hounds, several long spindly creatures crouched at his feet and stared down at Kaoru and Kenshin with bulging red eyes. "Thin wisps of smoke arose from the roof as stray drops of the monsters' saliva ate into the roof tiles.

Kaoru couldn't help a mental shiver as she saw the corner of Aoshi's mouth curl upward in a faint, blood-chilling smile. "She had never seen such a purely... evil expression on anyone's face before. "In that instant, she \*knew\* where Junichi's mysterious puppetmaster had gone.

(No wonder.... "It's taken possession of Aoshi!)

"The sword," Aoshi coolly demanded.

Junichi burst out, "What are you talking about?" "You can't take Kinslayer!" "I haven't gotten my revenge yet!" "I haven't defeated the Battousai!"

Aoshi said mockingly, "Do you really think you ever had a chance?"

"You promised!" "You swore that...."

For the first time in the entire encounter with Junichi, the Battousai smiled ever so slightly. "You know what they say about those foolish enough to believe the promises of demons, Minobe."

Aoshi uttered a nasty chuckle. "The situation has changed. "You've of no use to me now, Minobe. "Now, I want Kinslayer."

"No!" "I can beat him!" "I know I can!"

The monsters stirred restlessly, but the expression on Aoshi's face made it clear that the demon was apparently amused by Junichi's continued defiance.

Kenshin stepped forward and said flatly, "You're not getting Kinslayer."

"Do you think that you'd be any more successful in stopping me than this fool?" the demon said mockingly as Aoshi pointed at Junichi.

Preoccupied with the ongoing conversation, no one noticed as a large

black raven silently landed in the shadows of a nearby building.

Kenshin refused to be distracted by the demon's taunts and continued to warily watch the demon's every move.

Apparently bored with the whole affair, Aoshi gestured impatiently.

Kinslayer wrenched itself free of Junichi's desperate grasp and dropped neatly into Aoshi's right hand. "He leisurely held out his left hand and the cursed sword's sheath followed suit.

"No!" howled Junichi. "At that moment, Kaoru frantically threw herself against the bars of her prison. This time, she felt something give way. She was free... but only partially. To her dismay, Junichi stubbornly refused to be ousted from his host body. In response to the struggle for ownership, Kaoru's body suddenly collapsed and started thrashing convulsively on the ground.

Kenshin ignored her for the moment and leapt toward Shinomori, only to be intercepted by the scuttling, slime-drooling monsters that had been hovering eagerly at their master's side.

He effortlessly evaded the first raking slash and retaliated with a swift vertical cut that nearly cut the beast in half. As the Battousai fought off another creature's attack, Shinomori said, "I would have much rather preferred to use \*you\* against the Hunter, but you proved to be unexpectedly stubborn. I would deal with you myself, but I'm somewhat pressed for time. I have an appointment to keep with an old enemy and much to do beforehand."

And with those words, Shinomori gave Kenshin a mocking salute with Kinslayer and departed to the east.

Kenshin's first instinct was to pursue Shinomori and retrieve Kinslayer, but aside from the monsters bent on blocking his path, there was also the problem of the obviously helpless Kaoru. The thought of killing her himself had been difficult enough to contemplate, but to leave her to the mercies of these demonic beasts.... At least if he had been doing the killing, he could have made certain that her death was as swift and painless as possible. However, with those creatures, he had no such assurance.

As he struggled with his decision, Kenshin continued to beat back his attackers. This was the sort of combat that the Hiten Mitsurugi Ryu was created for. The opponents might be nonhuman, their weapons might be fangs and claws, but the dance was the same. He needed to eliminate his opponents as swiftly as possible if he was to stand any chance of catching the possessed Shinomori.

Suddenly, someone -- or something -- spoke to him.

Let him have it.

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The words were not spoken aloud, but rather to his mind... or rather something hidden deep within his mind. Even as his fight with the monsters continued uninterrupted in the physical world, Kenshin found

himself on an unfamiliar mindscape... and embodied in an unexpected form.

Razor-edged scales softly rustled as the dragon that was Kenshin peered around warily at its strange new surroundings with great golden eyes and curtly snapped, What did you say!?

Let him have it, came the harsh, equally curt reply. ^ The voice came from a huge, shadowy raven that hovered nearby, its dark amber eyes glittering.

The dragon that was Kenshin reared up, its whiskers stiffened in outrage, and snarled, What!?

You heard me. ^ Let the demon take the sword, rasped the raven impatiently. ^ Or are you so eager to let the monsters have the girl?

The dragon hissed deep in its throat, exposing a mouthful of gleaming white fangs.

Give it up. ^ I'm not that easily impressed, retorted the raven.

.... ^ The dragon glared at it, its tail twitching angrily.

Baka!

The dragon/Kenshin involuntarily twitched. ^ It sounded so much like his old teacher who used to frequently yell at him -- and who \*still\* yelled at him -- in the exact same tone of exasperation and irritation. ^ The mental equivalent of a sharp smack which accompanied the exasperated exclamation was also stingingly familiar.

I've had plenty of experience dealing with dragons like you.

The sheer arrogance... the overwhelming air of confidence... the razor's edge of malice.... ^ The raven's voice sounded like an unholy mixture of Saitoh Hajime AND Hiko Seijuro -- a combination frightening enough to make the most cold-blooded fighter cringe.

That thought got Kenshin another sharp mental cuff from the raven.

I \*heard\* that. ^ Don't you dare liken me to that arrogant ass Hiko!

(Most definitely like Shishou....) the dragon muttered very, very quietly to itself.

Let the demon have Kinslayer, the raven repeated in an irritable voice.

Why? the dragon demanded.

So that Shinomori can break the seals and release the demon, replied the raven, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

WHAT!?!?

Stop howling like that! ^ You heard me perfectly well.

The dragon pounced at the raven, gleaming claws outstretched, but the raven vanished in a blur. ^ An instant later, a set of cruel talons dug painfully into the dragon's back and pinned it down. ^

With a snort of contempt, the raven said, You're too young and too inexperienced to catch me like that.

The dragon thrashed and tried to wrench itself free, but to no avail. ^ Although the talons' grip was painful, it quickly realized that the raven was not inflicting any real damage. ^

With its sharp beak poised dangerously close to the dragon's head, the raven snapped, Idiot! ^ The demon must be freed before it can be destroyed. ^ Even if you defeat Shinomori now, that solves nothing. ^ The demon remains and so the danger remains. ^ You would have only bought a little time, nothing more. ^ Follow our lead and you stand a good chance of destroying the demon once and for all.

Who are you? the dragon/Kenshin snarled suspiciously as it twisted its head and peered up at the raven. ^ Why should I trust you? ^

Use your instincts to see the truth, then ask me again.

As the dragon that was Kenshin strained its senses to their utmost limits, Kyoto seemed to unfold before him like a great map overlaid by a bewildering pattern of glowing lines, bright points of light, and scraggly patches of darkness. ^ But the impressions he received were not limited solely to sight, but rather involved all his senses....

....the soothing sound of temple bells....  
> ....the cold, clammy sensation of restless spirits....<br> ....the foul aftertaste that hinted of rotting flesh....  
> ....the subtle odor of holy incense.... <p>

Then the dragon picked up the faint trace of another presence prowling through the city. ^ It was immeasurably old and powerful... a flash of glittering fangs and glowing amber eyes... something that was dark and bloody, cold and ruthless... but not necessarily evil.

The Hunter.... murmured the raven.

No, that presence wasn't evil... not compared to the lurking mass of foulness that he instantly recognized as the true enemy -- that entity could only be the demon responsible for all the death and terror choking Kyoto. ^

....and the Love-Eater, the raven said in a terse hiss.

Then Kenshin gradually became aware of a subtle pattern woven around the demon... a pattern was now fraying, like a fragile net slowly being shredded.



(No... not a net, but a binding holding it prisoner...,) a newly born instinct within him said.

Through the gaping holes in the binding, little patches of evil oozed free and crawled across the landscape of the city, leaving behind fear and misery like the slimy trails of slugs. ^ And tangled in the fraying net of power that held the demon, Kenshin saw Kinslayer. ^ The tainted blade seemed to be slowly sawing its way through the strands confining the Love-Eater, but it also seemed to be the linchpin that held much of the binding in place around the monster.

The binding... can it be repaired? asked the dragon.

The raven chuckled unpleasantly. ^ Only temporarily and to a much weakened state. ^ The seals are old. ^ Once broken, they can never be returned to their full power. ^ The Love-Eater would be able to free itself with comparative ease. ^ And the demon will only gain power as time passes.

So the only option is destruction.

Yes, now while it is still weakened from its long confinement. ^ However, that cannot be accomplished while the binding is still in place.

Now I understand. ^ The binding is both prison and shield.

I'm glad you've finally decided to start pay attention to the overall picture, the raven said mockingly. ^ I was beginning to wonder if you had been dropped on your head a few too many times when you were a baby.

The dragon shook its head in annoyance, then focused its newly awakened senses on the raven. ^ Kenshin received an impression of something that was all hard, sharp edges mixed with a lethal coldness that reminded him strongly of the Hunter.

But hidden deep inside the cruelly-edged presence, he sensed a sort of... warmth... that was strangely familiar. ^ It had surrounded him once, keeping him safe and secure....

(I... I know it. ^ Somehow... I know... \*her\*,) the dragon thought to itself in bewilderment. ^ For the presence was female, he knew that with utter assurance.

Then Kenshin heard a soft sound... a faint thumping rhythm that he instantly recognized. ^ That sound had been the very first thing he had ever been aware of... the first thing in his world.

It was the sound of a beating heart.

Who... who are you? asked the dragon in an oddly tentative voice. ^ I... know you.

The raven stiffened and blinked in surprise. ^ It hadn't expected this particular development.

Kenshin continued, I don't know exactly when or where, but... we were once... very close, weren't we? ^ I can feel it....

The raven that was Risako slowly eased its powerful mental grip on the dragon that was Kenshin -- her only child. ^ She stepped away from him and the two of them stared at each other for a long moment. ^ When the raven finally answered, its voice had softened, losing some of its earlier arrogance and harshness.

That's not important for now, little one. ^ Concern yourself with your woman. ^ The rest can wait.

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The entire mental conversation took place in an instant. ^ Back in the physical world, Kenshin had been steadily working his way through the pack of demonic monsters with relentless efficiency. ^ His attention was suddenly caught by Kaoru's voice frantically shouting, "Kenshin, look out behind you!"

In a blur, he sidestepped. ^ In the same smooth motion, he turned and counterattacked, the lethally sharp edge of the katana whipping forward in a move calculated to slice his opponent down to the spine. ^ But his golden eyes abruptly widened as he finally got a look at his tanto-wielding attacker.

....Kaoru....

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> (end of part 24) <p>

\*\*\*\*\* Author's Notes \*\*\*\*\*

Next part: ^ ^ Finally some face-to-face interaction between Kenshin and Kaoru! ^ A family reunion of sorts, not to mention an interesting confrontation between Kenshin and his cough grandsire. ^ ^ =^\_ ^=

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